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MAGAZINE



LAW OF THE BUFFALO GUN

by *Edwin Truett*

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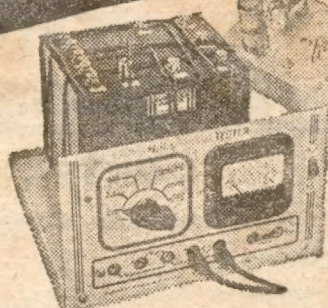
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LAW OF THE

This man who called himself Smith had a grimly black past and he had come west to dodge it. But now, as this wild-building railroad's trouble-shooter, he was discovering that two serious parts of that past had followed him — along with skulduggery, venom, and the wrath of vengeance! . . .

By
**EDWIN
TRUETT**

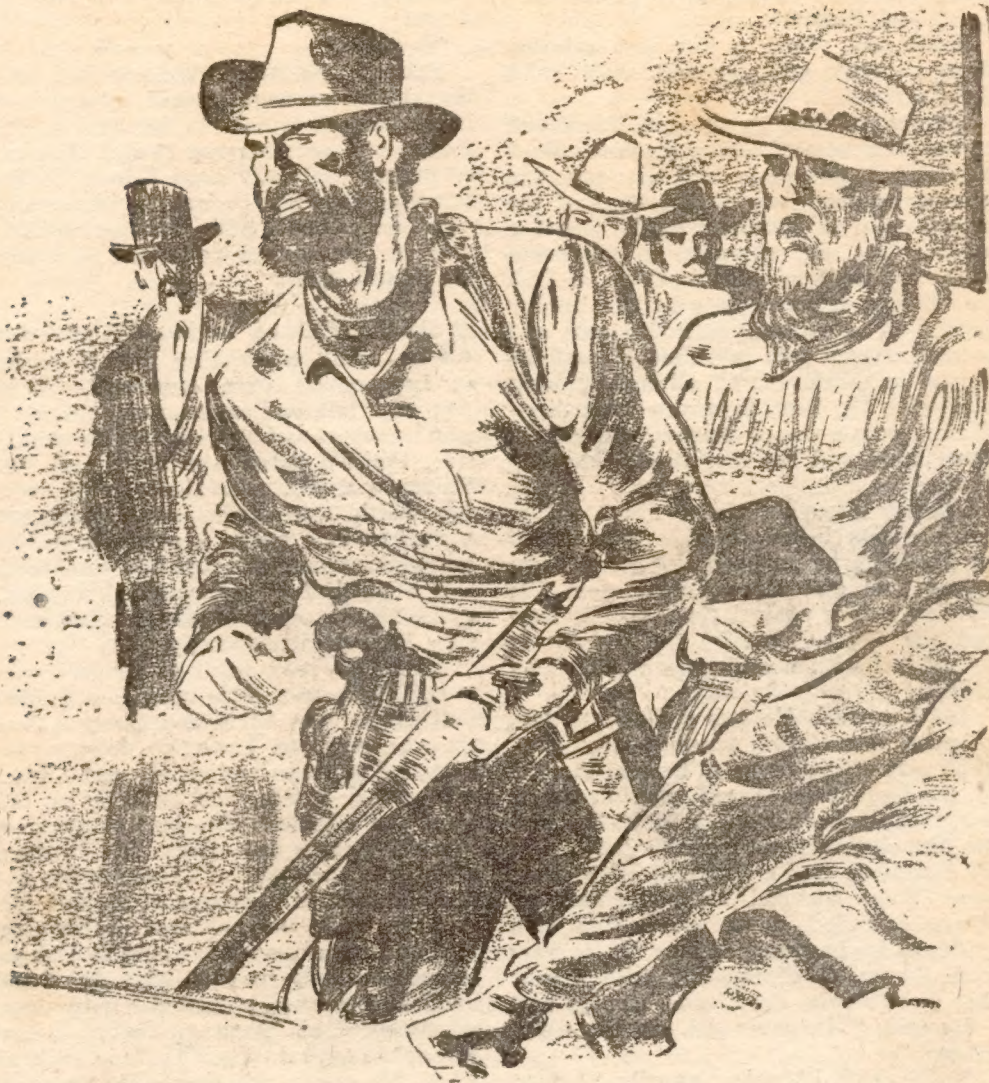


HE came down the steps of the private car that was attached to the long work train and paused for a moment on the gleaming white ballast, beside the new ties. He lighted the twisted stogie just given him, inhaled deeply and stared off toward the east. Twin rails glistened and gleamed in the red of the setting sun, gradually converging in the distance and fading away.

A short, stocky man, in the blue uniform

of a general of the United States Army, came out on the platform of the private car and looked down at the man, turned

BUFFALO GUN



his head in the same direction. His voice was low, but pleased:

"We're doing it, Smith! We're doing it! We'll push it through in spite of hell and high water. If the demmed bankers will leave us alone."

The man addressed as Smith nodded,

Smith's teeth gleamed and his right hand hovered over his pistol as he faced McMurray.

his teeth flashing white behind his thick black beard. He gestured with his thumb at the work train. Roustabout laborers were

unloading the highly piled cars. Railbolts, fishplates, rails, lumber, ties, ready-cut timbers for bridges, quartermaster supplies and supplies for the commissary, all were being taken to their proper places with speed and dispatch.

Smith said, "Long as they give us something to work with, general, we'll build their railroad."

The general drew on his cigar. The sound of two shots came from up the track. Both men tensed, peered in that direction, the general coming down to the steps of the private car. A hundred yards ahead a squalid tent city sprawled to the north of the right of way. Moving Town, or Hell On Wheels, it was called by the tawdry galaxy of gamblers, saloonkeepers and painted women who inhabited it, and the biggest establishment of all was fittingly named the Big Tent. Now men—and short-skirted women—were pouring out of the lesser tents and running toward the Big Tent.

General Grenville Dodge swore softly, but his eyes belied the low tone. "Hell on Wheels," he snapped. "Been a thorn in my side ever since I took over. I'm running a race against time, against time and the Central Pacific, and I have to be saddled with a millstone like Hell on Wheels!"

Smith turned. He was a big man, tall, wide-shouldered, but phenomenally thin. That part of his visage to be seen in spite of the huge black beard was burned as brown as the leather on his McClellan saddle. Seeming to pour from his hairline in all directions was a series of deep white scars. Some spanned his high forehead, others extended down across the thin bridge of his hawkshaped nose. These scars were the result of tangling with a bear that wasn't quite dead, some months ago.

He said, "Whenever you say the word, general."

Dodge chewed his cigar angrily. "I want to be fair. Men working as hard as my men work have to have some recreation, and it's not my place to tell them to keep away from those gyps and crooked women!" He seemed to be growing angrier and angrier as he spoke. "But I'm eternally damned if I'm going to have any of my key men shot down like dogs by that trash!"

The black-bearded Smith nodded. He

said. "We'll see about it, general." He turned his head, called, "Yakima!"

Yakima Bill crawled groaningly from beneath the private car where he had been indulging in forty winks. "What's it, Ars?"

"Let's go."

Yakima moaned a little, reached back beneath the car and dragged out a pair of rifles, one of which he handed to Ars Smith, and together the two of them set off toward Hell On Wheels. General Dodge, watching them go, chewed on his crooked cigar and smiled a smile that was similarly crooked. He turned and went back into his private car.

ARs SMITH and Yakima Bill presented an oddly contrasting picture as far as appearances were concerned. Where Ars was tall and cadaverous, the older man was short and somewhat on the chunky side. Smith's beard was black and full, Yakima's sparse and nearly white with age. Smith wore a faded cavalryman's hat, turned up at one side, a pair of once blue army-issue trousers tucked into store boots, and a patched butternut shirt. Yakima's entire rig was made of soft bleached buckskin, beaded extravagantly.

About the only point of similarity between them was their weapons. Smith's first name was short for Arsenal, and though everyone knew no human was named Arsenal in reality, the name fitted. He carried a rifle, butt beneath his left arm, like a hunter. The butt of an army revolver protruded from his trousers slightly to the right of his flat belly, and another rode in a holster at his left hip. A bowie knife was holstered on his right hip, and more than one would-be badman learned—usually too late—that Ars Smith carried a derringer tucked safely somewhere about his person, a derringer that was apt to appear miraculously in his hand while his opponent's eyes were watching another and more deadly weapon.

Yakima Bill, the Buffalo hunter, was almost identically armed.

The Big Tent was thronged, although already uninterested parties were turning aside toward the long bar that went the entire length of the canvas structure on the west side. Smith shouldered his way through them, Yakima following in his

wake. More than one man, who growled resentfully at thus being shouldered aside, cut the growl off quickly and smiled like an automaton at seeing who the impatient party was.

By the time the two had reached the center of the tent where the throng was thickest, news of their coming had advanced before them and the crowd parted to let them into the center of the attraction.

A man was gasping out his last breath on the graveled floor, a white-faced youngster holding his head. Smith cursed aloud. It was Farrel, one of the best surveyors that worked for General Dodge and the Union Pacific, and the lad holding his head was his younger brother, Cliff, who worked as a rodman for the same crew. Wordlessly Smith knelt beside the dying man, handling his rifle to Yakima, but even as he sank to his knees Farrel died, life draining from the gaping hole in his chest.

Gently young Cliff placed his brother's head on the gravel, his thin lips twisting determinedly. "Loan me a gun, Smith," he grated. "I'll kill McMurray and all the rest of them, damn their bloody souls."

Smith said, "McMurray? Never mind, I'll take care of it, Cliff." Slowly he got to his feet, and again the crowd parted to let him through.

A man and a woman sat at a poker table in the waist of the tent, and these two, apparently, were the only people in the tent unaware of impending drama. McMurray, the dour Scot, and this woman, Barbary Bet, owned the Big Tent.

HURRIEDLY the crowd fled from behind the table. Those at the bar pressed closer to it, watched with half-fearful, half-curious eyes. Smith paused before the table, hands on hips. The gambler continued to spread his cards in a game of solitaire. Smith moved like a panther, leaned across the table and swept the cards to the floor.

Dour Donald McMurray was a small man in stature, a big man in evilness. From the very start he had been the most ruthless operator in Hell on Wheels. He was considerable of a dandy, as gamblers usually were, and the blackness of his

silky mustaches served only to accent the effeminate whiteness of his skin.

He turned cold greenish eyes on the bearded man before him. But he was very careful to keep his hands in sight on the table. For a moment the green eyes clashed with the black.

Barbary Bet struck a match nervously and applied it to her cigar. "Don't go off half-cocked, Smith," she said, in a husky contralto. "Ask anyone." Her fat white hand included all onlookers, her diamonds dancing and glittering in the light. "Farrel accused McMurray of cheating and went for him with a knife. There was nothing to do but shoot him."

"Give me a gun, damn it, give me a gun!" cried Cliff Farrel. Yakima Bill held him back, but failed to hold back his voice. "I was at my brother's shoulder!" he screamed, "I saw it all. Sure he started for McMurray with a knife—for McMurray cold-decked him, that's what! Will somebody please give me a knife?"

Dour Donald McMurray shrugged.

Smith put both hands on the table and leaned toward him. "The cry of the striped lamb, eh, McMurray?"

Barbary Bet dragged deeply on her cigar; McMurray shrugged again and said: "Bet told you how it was, Smith. Ask anyone."

A pudgy little man, in clothes that were unmistakably from the city, asked his companion for the twentieth time, "But damn it all, who is it?"

His companion, equally well-dressed, responded, "Ssssssh! Hush, Yerkes. That man is Ars Smith, trouble-shooter for General Dodge himself."

Yerkes subsided, muttering beneath his breath, "I'll swear I've seen him somewhere."

Smith was saying, "—and a man's money and his morals are his own, I'd be the first to admit. But!" He put a cold emphasis on the last word. "Farrel happened to be a man that we need badly. Replacing him is going to take some time. We're building a railroad, McMurray. What do you say to that?"

McMurray snapped, "You're building a railroad and I'm running a gambling house!"

"Maybe," responded Smith, "the two won't mix. On second thought, my crooked

friend, I think it best if you were gone about this time tomorrow. What do you think? Answer me!" The last word was like a whiplash. Black eyes continued to clash with green eyes. Barbary Bet's powdered bosom rose and fell stridently.

McMurray got up slowly, adjusting the linen cuffs at his wrists. If possible, the crowd grew even more tense, for Smith had stepped back, his right hand hovering over the pistol thrust into his waistband, his white teeth gleaming as if he were laughing.

McMurray said, softly, "It may be better, Smith, for—shall we say—a few days, at least?" The tones were soft, almost nonchalant, yet there was a distinct threat in them. The gambler turned and walked slowly through the rear door of the Big Tent.

A sigh went up from the crowd.

Barbary Bet looked up at the bearded Smith with a strange light in her eyes. "Does that include me, Mister Smith?"

Smith glared at her. "As far as I'm concerned I never bother or worry about women. You can do as you please!"

Smith turned away from her and started toward the front of the tent. Already Yakima Bill had appointed several bystanders to take the body of the elder Farrel out. Young Cliff had followed them grimly. A rude coffin would be quickly constructed and Farrel would take his place in one of the innumerable boothills that marked the right of way of the Union Pacific.

Back at the bar, the man Yerkes said to his relieved friend, "What right has that fellow with the beard to do what he did? And what will McMurray do?"

"Listen, Yerkes, and I'll set you wise to something. You're fresh out here from New York and you have a lot of capital that you want to put to work. If you want to keep your money and your health as well, don't pry into other people's affairs here or at end of the line." He tossed off his drink, leaned closer to the fat Yerkes' ear. "Like I told you, Smith is trouble-shooter for General Dodge. If he came in here and passed along that word to McMurray, it's a cinch that Dodge wanted the word passed."

Yerkes looked slightly bewildered. "And this gambler, McMurray? He'll—?"

But Yerkes had one more remark to

make. He shook his head dubiously, said, "I've seen him somewhere, but hell, his name wasn't Smith and he didn't have a beard!"

CHAPTER II

Eye For An Eye

UNDER the resistless driving of General Dodge the twin rails crawled relentlessly westward. *Speed! Speed!* That was the watchword, for not only was Dodge racing the Central Pacific, coming eastward from Sacramento, as a matter of pride, but also because of the great government grants given to the builders. For every mile of track laid, the railroads received hundreds of acres in government grants to either side of the right of way. Already the promotional experts of the U. P. were advertising in the eastern papers—and as far as Europe, itself—for settlers to take up this land on long-term payments. And they were doing so—following the steel rails on a westward trek toward the setting sun.

Supplies and more supplies were constantly needed to keep Dodge's Irish roustabouts at work. From St. Joseph, Missouri, they went to Omaha, the grand base of operations, the beginning of the line. Kearney, 196 miles west, was the first base of operations, to be followed by North Platte, Julesburg and on from Colorado into Cheyenne. A constant stream of land speculators and representatives of eastern bankers followed the rails, and each base of supplies boomed in turn. No sooner had Hell on Wheels arrived and the tents been set up than these men descended like vultures, to lay out townships and lots, to organize real-estate booms. Each temporary base was destined to be the metropolis of the West if its promoters were to be believed.

The man called Arsenal Smith accomplished a thousand and one little chores for General Dodge during that time. When the rails moved on into Wyoming, on to Cheyenne to establish a base of supplies, he was far ahead, in the mountains with a surveying crew. A rider brought him word that the general wanted to see him.

In two days Smith was back for his first sight of Cheyenne. Even viewing it



As Parkington tried to brush past, Smith whirled him around.

for the first time, Smith somehow felt that Cheyenne was, in truth, to be a real city in time. He rode through the roughly laid-out streets with a strange feeling that sooner or later this would be his town. If he could ever make himself settle down, he thought wryly.

THE blue uniforms of the regulars mixed with the buckskin of the plainsmen and the ragged clothes of the busted Forty-niners. There were Mexicans and Boston Irish, track men, graders, bridge men, tie choppers, all circulating through the hundred dives already in existence. Smith went into the Big Tent and had a drink, feeling glumly satisfied that Dour Donald McMur-ray wasn't around. An inquiry told him

that the Scotch gambler hadn't been around since being warned off by Smith after the killing of Farrell the surveyor.

A voice at his elbow said, softly, "Been away, Smith?" He turned and glowered at the blonde Barbary Bet. She smiled at him cozily. Although he didn't answer, in fact started to turn away, she grasped his sleeve. The smile left her face, her brows knit, as she said, "You must be human along some lines. I've got a little information to trade with you if you're not afraid to listen to it. Of course, if you're afraid——?"

He laughed shortly. "I haven't seen anything yet I was afraid of, ma'am," he said, shortly. She turned, led the way to a table near the rear. A barman came with a bottle of brandy and two glasses. While Smith

poured, she watched him quizzically.

"You know," she said, "some woman must have done you a lot of dirt at one time or other to make you the way you are."

His eyes blazed for a moment, his laugh was short. "Maybe I did the woman dirt," he snapped. The glasses clinked. Afterward he sat his on the table. "What's on your mind, ma'am?"

She didn't beat about the brush. She said, "McMurray's here. He never left at all—just sort of stayed in the background."

Smith nodded. "I figured he'd do that. Long as he doesn't operate it's no skin off my nose."

"It'll be a hell of a lot of skin off you somewhere if he manages to get you killed," she snapped. "And that's what he's planning. Says he likes this location of Cheyenne and aims to stay here. He'll be out in the open, you know that, and you also know there's only one way he can do it. To get rid of you."

Smith laughed shortly. "A lot of men have tried that in the last few years, ma'am." His eyes narrowed a little. "And why would *you* be telling me this. You're McMurray's pardner."

She shrugged her powdered shoulders "Maybe," she said, looking directly into his eyes, "maybe it's because there's something about you I like. What would it be worth to you to know where McMurray is right now? It's a damned sight better to kill a snake while he's sunning himself than to wait until he's coiled and ready to strike."

He turned it over in his mind soberly and knew she was speaking the truth for more reasons than she knew. If McMurray, as she claimed, meant to stay on in Cheyenne, he was bound to run onto him sooner or later, and there would be a showdown. He had told the gambler to leave, but the gambler had remained. Once Smith was refused obedience by *anyone*, his value as a trouble-shooter for General Dodge dropped to zero. And further—though this was odd—even riding into the town he'd picked Cheyenne as his own. And no town was big enough for Smith and McMurray.

"It might be worth while," he admitted. "What do you want for the information?"

"A little information from you. There's a rumor that General Dodge plans to

establish the shops here in Cheyenne. I'd like to know if it's true or false."

"I wouldn't know, ma'am. I've been out with a surveying gang." He knew why she wanted to know. If the shops were established in Cheyenne they would give the town unmistakable permanence, and anyone who *happened* to have the foresight to own a lot of important lots would grow rich practically overnight.

She snapped, "You can find out, Smith. And I want the information for me, not for every Tom, Dick and Harry with a few dollars to invest."

A cracked voice at his shoulder drawled, "Heard you rode in, Ars. The general's eating one cigar after another waiting for you. Something sure got his wind up."

Smith arose, pushing back the crude chair. Barbary Bet said, "You'll be back?"

He nodded, grinned. "Maybe we can trade, ma'am."

SMITH found General Dodge stamping the floor of his private car, chewing cigars to shreds and damning all bankers. He waved a long telegram in Smith's face, read it aloud.

"So there it is," Dodge swore. "They want me to build a railroad but they won't send me supplies, say I'm using them too fast. Oh, I know what's wrong. Bunch of speculators trying to sell high, that's all. Now, Ars, there's an engine and a caboose on the siding there, headed toward Omaha. I've written a slight note to Mister Parkington, who seems to be behind this, but once you give it to him, add a few well-spoken words of your own. And add them hot and heavy. There's a head of steam on that engine. How soon can you get gone?"

In twenty minutes Ars Smith was headed toward Omaha, 517 miles to the east. The run was made in a flat twenty hours.

The elegance of Omaha, small as it was, made Smith uneasy. He left his weapons in the caboose, all but one pistol and the derringer, changed his shirt, combed his hair and beard and set out for the Palace Hotel where the addressee of his sealed note, Mister Parkington, was living. It was the first time the man called Smith had been even on the fringes of civilization for over two years.

The Palace Hotel was a towering struc-

ture of four stories, covering nearly an entire half city block. Drays, loaded tow-eringly, and carriages pulled by spirited horses filled the street. City people thronged the sidewalks, stores displayed undreamed-of luxuries. Smith grew more and more ill at ease. Before entering the hotel to find his man he paid a visit to the Palace Saloon. Instead of helping him, it made him even worse off, its polished elegance making him feel as conspicuous as a sore thumb. It wasn't until the room clerk's disdain and scorn angered him thoroughly that Smith was able to cast off his nervousness, even to laugh at himself.

He leaned across the marble-topped counter and caught the effeminate-appearing clerk by the front of the ruffled shirt, dragged him halfway over the counter. "Mister," he grated, "I asked for Parkington's number. In Cheyenne, where I come from, I always get polite answers."

The clerk managed to blurt out the proper room number, and Smith stomped up the velvet-covered stairs still laughing at himself. Nearing Number 210, Smith saw the door open. A man emerged. He was short and stocky, with immense mustaches and clothes that spoke of wealth. Smith said, "Mister Parkington?"

"Yes, yes, I'm Parkington." Shrewd banker's eyes surveyed Smith, evidently were not impressed with the worn clothes, the black beard. "Sorry, my good man, some other time, perhaps. Very busy, very busy."

He tried to brush past Smith. Hard fingers caught his shoulder and whirled him around. Smith said, "Whatever you're so busy at, it can wait. I'm from General Dodge."

Mister Parkington deflated, quickly and completely. He led Smith back into Room 210 and asked him to be seated while he opened the sealed note Dodge had written. Reading, a flush of anger overspread his fat cheeks. Smith thought his jowls quivered like those of a bulldog while he read.

"Impertinence!" the financier roared. "Rank impertinence! Does he realize whom he is addressng?"

"I imagine he does," drawled Smith. "The note was addressed to you. He also asked me to make a few pertinent remarks." He rolled his eyes ceilingward. "Ever hear about the time General Dodge

killed the 200-pound Secesh with his own hands? Gouged out his eyes, he did, and choked him to death. Down in Tennessee, that was." He allowed his imagination full run for the next ten minutes, fighting to keep down his laughter at Parkington's agitation.

When he had finished, Parkington said, "But isn't anything sacred to the man? Nothing at all?"

Solemnly Smith shook his head. "Not bankers or real-estate sharks or speculators. Hardly anything except building a railroad—and he aims to do that in spite of hell and high water!"

"I'll . . . I'll see what I can do to . . . ah . . . speed things up, sir. You may tell that to General Dodge."

Smith arose, nodding. "I would, if I were you," he said. "The General said to tell you if those supplies weren't rolling in a little more regularly he'd come back to Omaha himself to find the reason." He shuddered. "I'd hate to have that happen."

Parkington's eyes once more swept over this scarred and bearded giant. He shuddered in turn. If this man was afraid of Dodge—!

SATISFIED with himself, Smith sank into a deep chair in the lobby of the hotel and lit a cigar. From behind the comparative safety of the marble counter the clerk viewed him with trepidation. A hardware drummer took the seat beside Smith, tried without success to open a conversation. Just as Smith was about to leave in disgust, something drew his eyes to the broad, carpeted staircase down which he had just come.

A woman was coming down those steps. She was dressed in the prevailing fashion, but not even swirling skirts and huge sleeves were successful in concealing her lithesome charms. Hair peeping out from her lacy bonnet was the color of freshly colored copper, and her eyes were bold and brown, her mouth arrogantly red. Smith gasped.

The hardware drummer misinterpreted the gasp and saw his opening for a fresh conversational attempt. His elbow dug into Smith's ribs. "That's Miss Lily Belle," he whispered hoarsely. "Sings down at the Opera House, she does. Some woman, eh?"

The man called Smith didn't bother to

answer. It is doubtful if he heard. The vision came down the steps daintily, swept her eyes across the lobby, over Smith himself, the drummer, the bowing clerk, then, in no hurry whatsoever, walked through that lobby and out onto the street.

For a moment Smith sat there, unable to believe his eyes. Somehow he got to his feet, went through the lobby himself. She was just driving away behind a team of spanking bays. The man who held the reins was Parkington.

"Lilly Belle," he said, wonderingly. "Lilly Belle!" He swayed slightly there on the sidewalk, drew his hand across his eyes in utter disbelief. The last time he had seen this woman was over two years before. She had tried to kill him—with a knife. And she had warned him that she meant to trace him to the ends of the earth and claim an eye for an eye! Lilly Belle! No more her name than his name was Smith!

CHAPTER III

Bitter Past

THAT NIGHT HE paced the floor in his hotel room trying to blot out memory with whiskey, and trying unsuccessfully.

He saw, in his mind's eye, a Georgia plantation before the war, with rolling fields of cotton and a graceful plantation house, shaded by age-old trees. He saw himself riding up on a white horse and tossing the reins to a grinning darky, saw himself fling out of the saddle, proud of his uniform.

A girl ran down the steps to greet him, a girl with copper-colored hair, whose slim white fingers he pressed to his lips. An old man with a cane stood at the top of the steps and quavered, "Welcome, sir, welcome home to Shields Manor." He went up the steps to shake the old man's hand. He could even hear himself trusting that Major Shield's health was good.

There had been juleps, tall and cool, on the broad front porch, and there had been a magnificent meal by candlelight while they questioned him about his work at the U. S. Military Academy where he was in his last year. He remembered trying to lead the old man away from the

topic, for he'd been certain what was coming. And it came.

Old Major Shields had said, at last, shaking his white head, "I still think, Yancey, it would have been better for you to go to the military institute in Virginia, like my son. But I reckon it doesn't matter. Some of the Southern boys are beginning to resign and come home already, I hear."

He'd nodded his head then, miserably, all too conscious of what the wait implied. It was as if the major had added "And we expect you to do the same."

But it was Belle who said, "And now that you aren't going back, Yancey—?"

It was like a dagger in his heart, but he managed it. He'd said, quietly enough, "But I am going back, Belle. I . . . I . . . a man has to follow his beliefs."

(There in the hotel room remembering these things, the man called Smith groaned aloud and drank from the bottle itself. . . .)

Even then, under the cold look of scorn in his betrothed's eyes, under the terrific tongue-lashing of her father, he hadn't been able to make himself believe that he had lost her. Major Shields, concluding his tirade, had said, "Always, sir, you have been allowed to come to my house, to court my daughter unrestricted because I believed you were a Southern gentleman! Now—well, damme, sir, your poor mother and father must be turning in their graves. Faugh! A turncoat! A traitor to the State that bred you, that gave you life!"

Drawing himself erect, the younger man had said, "Major, if you were a younger man I'd thrust those words down your throat. Traitor, sir! No! I'm being loyal to my State when I risk my life to keep her in the Union!"

"Get out, sir! And I'll advise you to leave town before I tell your old acquaintances that we are harboring a Yankee spy in our midst."

The young officer had bowed to the old man, and his eyes sought those of the girl he loved. But he read no pity there, no forgiveness, no understanding. Rather she moved about the table and stood beside her father, imperiously, scornfully. Once more he bowed, turned and left the room.

From what followed, Major Shields was as good as his word, for all during the few days he remained in the little Georgia town he was treated as a pariah and an



Shields sprang toward him with a knife, and Smith flung up his arm to ward the weapon off.

outcast. Not that anyone argued with him—rather he was disregarded altogether. The wall of silence built around him would have defeated a less-stubborn man. But he'd stayed on, hoping for he knew not what.

(He drank deeply again, this man named

Smith, and tossed the bottle into a corner, sprawled down across the bed.)

He remembered Stephen Yerkes, the only one of his old friends who had stuck by him. Right from the start it rather puzzled him why Yerkes stuck by him when all others deserted. For Yerkes had also been a suitor for beautiful Belle Shields' hand, and the Yerkes family, all of them, were notoriously poor losers. Stephen it was who conducted the affairs of his father's bank in town. He was a little on the plump side, and the dandyish quality of his imported clothing often made him appear ridiculous, though no one, of course, told him this. Yerkes often came to the hotel during those few days Yancey had stayed on so stubbornly. True, they never went to the bar together, but they often drank in the room.

It was Yerkes who had finally arranged a last meeting between Belle Shields and her former fiance. It was at a little pergola on the Shields plantation, and Yancey had gone there with his hopes high. There, to his consternation, he was met not only by Belle but by the major himself. Sick at heart, he'd listened to the old man's violent harangue. Suddenly, the major had taken a riding-crop from behind him and advanced on Yancey. This had been too much. The younger man took the crop from him and hurled it into the bushes.

The major had blustered, "You Yankee scoundrel, if I was a few years younger!"

"Never mind, father. I'm here! I'll do it for you!" And Kincaid Shields, the son had stepped out of the bushes, the crop in his hand.

"No, no!" That had been Belle, the woman he loved and always would love. She knew his rages, knew Yancey Gaddison when the blackness of his temper enveloped him. He saw her eyes turned on him in appeal, and even as the crop caught him across his outflung arm, knew that for her sake he was going to take this. He'd taken it. And after the younger Shields had tired of beating him with the crop, he'd even taken all the revilement from father and son alike. . . .

THE man called Smith rolled on the bed now and groaned. The rest was like the memory of a bad dream rather than the memory of an actual occurrence. He'd

been true to his oath, he'd fought for the Union and Abraham Lincoln rather than for his native State and Jefferson Davis. Only the man called Smith knew what tortures of the soul he had endured. Three times he had been wounded, and on each of those three occasions he had been seeking death. But somehow he lived, lived to become one of General Grenville Dodge's most trusted officers. Eventually, years after it had all started, Lee surrendered at Appomatox. For a long time Major Yancey Gaddison fought himself in New York. More than anything else he wanted to return to the country of his birth, to see Belle Shields once again. Surely, he'd reasoned, now that the war is over, hate and bloodshed should be forgotten and forgiven. Now, if never before, she needed him.

THE dilapidated surrey, pulled by a rawboned horse, stopped before the entrance of Shields Manor. Slowly, Yancey Gaddison, one-time major in the Union Army, got out. A moment later, Stephen Yerkes was beside him. The mansion was in ruins, was a blackened wreck. Already a tangle of undergrowth was surging about it, threatening to envelope it under their very eyes. Only one of the magnificent fluted columns was standing. Gaddison was struck dumb.

Yerkes said, "Sherman, on his march to the sea. Didn't leave much, did he?"

Yancey managed, "But surely they saved something, Steve. She—"

Yerkes shook his head. "Almost everyone that had specie or silver entrusted it to me at the bank. I tried to get it out, to England. It never got there."

Slowly Yancey turned away from ruin and desolation, climbed back into the surrey. Yerkes took his place beside him, picked up the reins and turned the surrey about. "I . . . well, I wouldn't hang around town much, Yancey. Folks are still pretty bitter. Major Shields is dead, you know, but there's still Kincaid. He lost an arm at Chickamauga and he's very bitter."

They rattled on for a half mile before Yancey answered. "These are my people, Yerkes. And Belle needs me more than ever right now. I'm going to see her."

Yerkes shook his head, but said nothing. Soon the surrey drew up before a battered

cottage on the fringes of the town. Yancey looked his disbelief.

Yerkes said, "This is it. She's pretty proud, Yancey. Does a little sewing for the wives of some of the carpetbaggers that have taken over these parts."

Yancey alighted, went slowly up the path to the little wreck of a house. He tapped at the door. A second later a voice came from the dimness inside—her voice.

"I have a pistol in my hand, Yancey Gaddison. Get away from that door, you traitor."

"Belle, Belle," he said, pleadingly, "let me talk to you, at least. I only want to help you, to do something for you!"

Her bitter laughter answered him. "Do something for me? Bring back my father, then. Bring back Kincaid's arm. The only thing you can ever do for me is to never let me see your face again."

He didn't try to argue; there was too much finality in her words. Stephen Yerkes drove him back to the hotel wordlessly. The hotel had been taken over by an enterprising if greasy Yankee, and the bar was filled with loud, boisterous carpetbaggers. Standing there with Yerkes at his elbow, Yancey drank bitterly, and wondered if after all he hadn't been wrong. Surely he hadn't fought and bled all those years for this. He bought a bottle of whiskey, took it up to his shabby room, Yerkes accompanying him.

At first he didn't feel the fiery liquor, but when it did hit him, it hit him hard. He sprawled on his back on the bed while across the grimy ceiling whirled a thousand and one scenes out of his past, some bitter, fewer sweet. He was only dimly conscious of Yerkes sitting silently in a chair by the window.

He didn't hear the knock, didn't hear anything at all until Yerkes was shaking him savagely, calling, "Get up, Yancey, for the love of God, get up. Kincaid Shields is here."

He raised up, bleary-eyed, the room still spinning. Young Shields was there, all right. He could hear his scornful voice even if his image did spin and whirl all about him.

"Yes, I'm here," snarled the voice, "and I'm going to kill you, you damned, treacherous Yankee lover!"

SOMEHOW Yancey had gotten waveringly to his feet, only to be knocked down by a vicious blow to the jaw. It cleared his head a bit, and when the steel fingers gripped his throat he was able to tear them loose, to hurl young Shields back against the wall. Panting, he waited. This time, as Shields sprang toward him he caught the gleam of metal, felt the bite of the knife in his outflung arm. He seized Kincaid Shields' wrist, pushed him backward. They fell, and Yancey's head hit the foot of the heavy bed. Blackness crept over him, he felt his grip relaxing on the knife wrist that threatened him. . . .

Then there was the fresh fire of raw whiskey in his throat to strangle him, the voice of Stephen Yerkes coming from an infinite distance. "Wake up—Yancey! Wake up! Man, you've killed him!"

He opened his eyes, threw off Yerkes' restraining arms and got to his knees. Kincaid Shields lay on his back on the faded carpet. The knife still protruded from the base of his throat. He mumbled, "No! No! I didn't—didn't—!" *This couldn't happen to him!*

Yerkes said, wildly, "You'll have to ride for it, Yancey. I tell you this town is ready for anything. Soldiers or no soldiers, they'll lynch you, they'll burn you alive!"

The door flung open. Like a man in a nightmare Yancey Gaddison stared at the woman who stood there. It was Belle Shields. Her eyes widened at sight of her brother, dead on the floor, narrowed at sight of her one-time lover, who faced her, swaying on his feet. His hands were covered with blood, his shirt front was stained crimson.

The pistol came up, unwaveringly. She said, "I was afraid he'd come here, afraid this would happen."

The pistol spoke and a furrow of fire laid its way across Yancey's head. He spun with the weight and the pain, recovered himself. She tossed the single-shot pistol at his feet. "Get out!" she cried. "I will kill you if I have to follow you to the gates of Hell!"

She dropped to her knees beside her dead brother. Stephen Yerkes seized Yancey's arm, somehow got him out of the room.

THE two years that followed were almost indescribable. He wrote often to Stephen Yerkes and the news from Yerkes was that Yancey Gaddison was wanted for murder.

Yancey changed his name to Smith, went west and roved the prairies and the mountains, rode alone to the west coast and knew the dives and gaiety of the Gold Coast. He hated all mankind, he hated himself.

Yet every month he sent all the money he could rake and scrape to Stephen Yerkes. The plan was that Yerkes was to tell Belle this money came from some asset or other that he had managed to recover from the rack and ruin of the war. The man named Smith never asked how she reacted to it.

Eventually he had drifted back as far east as Omaha, had run into his old commanding general, Grenville Dodge, on the streets. He had told Dodge his story, frankly and openly. Dodge told him to forget the past, engaged him on the spot.

CHAPTER IV

Canny Female

THE engine with its lonely caboose clattered over the newly laid rails, westward. Ars Smith sat alone in the caboose on a three-legged stool, his moody eyes contemplating the dirty floor. The wheels clacked out a strange and haunting melody, "Belle . . . Belle . . . Belle . . . Belle . . . Belle!"

What had the drummer meant, that she was singing at the Opera House? What was she doing in Omaha, anyway? His stomach turned, he sickened, at the thought that would not be denied. She'd promised to follow him to the ends of the earth, to follow him to hell, to kill him! Was she here in the West for that very purpose? Hadn't time tempered her thoughts of vengeance?

Kearney, Platte, North Platte, Julesburg, Cheyenne. . . .

A haggard man stepped off the caboose at Cheyenne and stood, as if uncertain, peering about him. Even in the few days of his absence Cheyenne seemed to have mushroomed. Lumber had come in, already a few rough streets had been laid out and

false-fronted buildings were being erected.

He went plodding along the right of way until he came to General Dodge's private car, went slowly up the steps. Dodge sat at a littered desk, the inevitable unlighted stogie in his mouth. He glanced up impatiently, saw who it was and leaned back in the chair, grinning around his stogie.

"Well, Smith," he said, genially, "how did you find Omaha and Mister Parkington?"

Smith managed to smile, a little wryly. "Both of them left a bad taste in my mouth," he admitted. "Mister Parkington wasn't very pleased with your note—and your attitude. I had to advise him of a few facts."

"Such as?"

Smith told him, gravely. General Dodge laughed, slapped the desk with the palm of his hand. "You've built me a reputation to live up to, Smith! And don't think for a minute I won't do it if there's any more finagling. Gad! Here we're trying to build a railroad such as the world has never seen, and little bloodsuckers and money-grubbers like Parkington and his clan try to tie us up to make an extra dollar!"

Smith remembered Belle Shields getting into the rig with Parkington.

"Just who is he, this Parkington?" he asked. "How did he ever get a finger in this pie?"

Dodge gestured disdainfully with his cigar. "The same breed that got rich selling maggotty beef to the army, Smith. Oh, he and his crowd have got money, and in a way they've got brains. Promoters, I guess you'd call them. Anyway, Parkington had brains enough to get the whole project reorganized and have himself rung in as a board chairman. There's a lot of easy money to be picked up around the construction of a railroad."

Smith nodded. He looked at the space over Dodge's head, said, "I think it might be smart to try to get some of that money, general, for myself. I sort of like this country around here."

Dodge's eyes narrowed, shrewdly. "Tired of building a railroad, Smith?"

Now Smith's eyes met his as he shook his head. "No, general. I'm just tired of running away, that's all. I'm about to realize that a man can't run from his past.

It's always there, right behind him, reaching out a hand to tap him on the shoulder." He grinned, wryly. "As I said, this is fine country and Cheyenne looks like a comer."

Dodge nodded. After all he knew the entire story of Smith's past, and could sympathize with the way he felt. "Getting in on the ground floor, Smith, you could be a big man in Cheyenne. It's a long way to Georgia. This town will have permanence where a lot of the others won't. I'm putting the division shops in Cheyenne."

Smith scarcely heard him. It's a long



Barbary Bet stood over Smith now, watching him intently and planning how she would use him.

way to Georgia, the general had said. It was like hell! Georgia, all that part of Georgia that mattered to Smith, was back there in Omaha. Georgia was Belle Shields—Belle Shields who had sworn to take his life. He mumbled something about letting the general know a little later and stumbled out of the car.

ALL through Hell On Wheels he asked for Yakima Bill, only to find at the thriving blacksmith's that Bill had departed for parts unknown a couple of days

ago. He nosed around looking for young Cliff Farrell. Ars Smith was beginning to learn what it meant to have the black mantle of loneliness descend upon him. He headed toward the Big Tent, entered, looked about. A half dozen people nodded to him. But none of them was the sort he would like to drink with, or to talk to. At the bar he picked up a bottle and glass and went slowly past the gambling games to a table near the edge of the canvas. He poured himself a drink, tossed it off, sat brooding, staring at the crowd

with unseeing eyes.

Barbary Bet entered from the rear of the Big Tent, was at the end of the bar nursing a drink before she saw Smith. Her eyes narrowed, filled with speculation. Barbary Bet was far from being a good woman, although there were many who would vouch for her bounty. But for each man who looked upon her as a goddess of mercy, there were at least three others who cursed the mention of her name. Barbary Bet, they often said, would have her own mother murdered for a single dollar, silver. She was, in truth, cold and hard, but the mother story was an exaggeration, at least at the quoted price. There was no room in Bet's hard, all-seeing heart for love for anyone but Bet. Men, she often told her favorite girls, were not made for woman's pleasure but for woman's profit.

Nevertheless, she stood there momentarily watching the man named Smith and something akin to pity swept over her. He was so damned black and brooding, so alone, she told herself. She picked up her glass and swept across the Big Tent, dropped down in the seat opposite him.

"Hello," she said, in her husky voice.

Smith turned his head slowly, frowning. He thought, what the hell, let her stay. It's somebody to drink with at least. He nodded, and without a word, refilled her glass from his bottle.

She raised hers, said, "Here's to Omaha. How was the metropolis?"

He looked his surprise. She laughed. "Oh, Barbary Bet knows about everything that goes on in these parts, Smith." They drank. "What'd you see in Omaha?" she asked.

"A ghost," he said, "a female ghost! Let's drink hearty to all female ghosts."

They drank hearty, her eyes curious. But he went no further, said no more about the matter.

After a while she said, "You know, Smith, you're about the loneliest man I know. Sad sort of job you have, isn't it?"

His laugh was unpleasant. "You're right. I'm thinking of giving it up. Already told the general. Cheyenne looks like a pretty good town to settle down in. Good enough for an old soldier like me, at least."

Her eyes grew shrewd. She toyed with her glass on the table. "Before you went away," she said softly, "I offered to trade

a little information with you, Smith. Remember."

He nodded, shrugged.

"Well?" she asked.

HE realized then that ever since General Dodge had mentioned it, he had been turning this thing over and over in his mind. He was sure, positive, that Cheyenne was the end of the line. Oh, he realized that he fully intended to go on with the general until the line was finished, until junction was made with Central Pacific. But that was merely a job to be finished because he had started it. He knew his future lay in this town of Cheyenne. He, Smith, intended buying property; why not tell Barbary Bet, let her in on a good thing? Bad as she was, she'd be a lot better than any of the professional sharks.

"The division shops will be here in Cheyenne," he said and refilled the glasses.

Her eyes never left his face; they were filled with suspicion. "I don't think so," she said at last.

He shrugged. "That's General Dodge's word. It's usually good. I'm going to bank on it and I ask you only one thing—keep it to yourself!"

She began to laugh, her head thrown back. At last, when she could get her breath she said, "I'm not laughing at you, Smith. I'm laughing at Thurman and that guy Yerkes and Dour Donald McMurray himself! They're so damned smart, all of them! Framed it up with some railroad bigshot named Parkington and they figure it's all fixed for shops and division point to be over at Laramie City. They've sunk an awful lot of money in the place—and now they'll be holding the sack."

Smith grinned in appreciation, but said nothing.

"You did your share," she said, softly, leaning toward him. "Now I'm doing mine. That's where you'll find McMurray, if you still want him—Laramie City."

Smith shook his head. He sounded like an old man, utterly exhausted. "Why should I want him? Long as he stays out of Cheyenne I don't care where he is. Oh, I'll be over that way before long, I suppose—the railroad goes that direction after all. If he's there—" He shrugged, as if it didn't matter whatsoever.

"That bunch of vultures won't take this

Cheyenne deal lying down. Doesn't this fellow Parkington throw any weight, hasn't he got anything to say about this?"

"General Dodge hash got all the shay."

She noted with a little amusement that his voice was getting thick, that his eyes were a bit on the glazed side. Quickly she filled his glass again, filled hers a quarter as full. He didn't notice, drained his drink.

For thirty minutes more she sat with him, feeding him liquor, which he took obediently. The truth of the matter was that the old blackness was on him again. The name Yerkes had aroused all the old nostalgic memories, had taken him back to Georgia and pre-war days again.

He never suspected that the Yerkes she spoke of was the same Stephan Yerkes he had known and trusted so long ago!

By the time the bottle was empty, the man called Smith had his arms on the table, his head on his arms. He was beginning to snore.

Barbary Bet was a woman who knew all the angles and played them. She signaled to a roustabout. Together they got Smith on his feet, led him out the rear entrance of the Big Tent on stumbling feet, half dragging, half carrying him.

BEHIND the Big Tent was Barbary Bet's own quarters, half canvas, half board. She pulled the door aside, they took Smith in and sat him on the edge of her bed. He swayed, his eyes tightly closed. At a signal from the grinning woman the roustabout pulled the boots from Smith's feet, swung him about and placed him full-length on the soft, scented cushions. She jerked her head, and the roustabout left. She went softly to a small bureau, extracted a cheroot from a box and lighted it, eyeing Smith contemplatively.

Smoke curled up and about her blonde curls. McMurray and Yerkes and Thurman and the others, she knew, were going to raise plenty of hell when they found they'd backed the wrong horse, found that she, Barbary Bet, had gobbled up practically all of the worthwhile property in Cheyenne. This man Smith didn't seem too enthusiastic, he might wander off at any time. She was going to need him, that much was certain—!

She stood over him now, watching intently. Above the blackness of his beard

his cheeks were flushed, his mouth twitched. She touched him on the shoulder, waited a moment and shook him. His head rolled to one side but he did not awaken. Her ringed fingers went softly down across his chest; she felt the money belt about his waist beneath his shirt. A moment later his shirt was unbuttoned and she was fumbling delicately through the compartments of the belt.

There was a letter addressed to A. A. Smith, St. Joseph, Missouri, nearly a year old. It said that the writer was giving the money each month to Miss Belle Shields as instructed. It also said that Miss Belle Shields was like a woman obsessed, in that she spoke of one Yancey Gaddison with utter hate, and swore eternally that her only aim in life was to have the pleasure of killing the black traitor who had killed her crippled brother. It was signed: *Stephen Yerkes*.

She found a clipping from a small town in Georgia, telling of the killing in a hotel room of one Kincaid Shields by one Yancey Gaddison, also telling of the immediate flight for parts unknown of Gaddison.

She folded them carefully the way they had been and put them back into the money belt, smiling triumphantly. She buttoned the dark shirt. It wasn't hard to put together. Smith was Yancey Gaddison. Smith had killed his sweetheart's brother, he was wanted for murder. Yerkes! Could it be the same Stephen Yerkes that was here in Wyoming Territory? It was possible. She looked down at the full black beard and the scarred features—a perfect disguise. Maybe Yerkes didn't know him. But surely Smith, or Gaddison, would know Yerkes. But not if he had never seen him here in Cheyenne! And it was altogether probable, she told herself, that he had not.

One thing she was sure of. Yancey Gaddison—or Smith, if he so preferred—was going to back her play, no matter what happened. Men wanted for murder hardly had a choice!

CHAPTER V

Two Dead Men

LARAMIE CITY represented the present end of the line for the Union Pa-

cific. On the same day that the man named Smith overdrank—and was so deftly searched by Barbary Bet—the rails themselves had progressed some two miles past the site chosen as the town. But already there were a few tents erected, as well as several clapboard shacks. A pretentious sign above one read: LARAMIE CITY DEVELOPMENT.

A floppishly dressed man arose from the box that served as a card table, saying, "About time for the work train, gentlemen. I trust everyone is at his best?"

The speaker was Stephen Yerkes. The man named Thurman and the gambler, Dour Donald McMurray, also arose. There was a great brushing of clothes, a drawing of sleeves over tall hats, an arranging of cravats.

McMurray said, "I don't feel quite right about this. Maybe we stand to make a jillion dollars, and on the other hand Dodge is a pretty stubborn sort of cuss. He says Cheyenne, you know that."

Thurman laughed confidently. "Parkington is the money man, he pays Dodge's salary. If he tells Dodge that the yards are going to be in Laramie City, here's where they'll be." A train whistled far down the track.

McMurray said, "Maybe I'll just sort of stay around here, gents, and keep the eggs warm. General Dodge doesn't care particularly for me."

"Nor does Ars Smith," jeered Yerkes. McMurray flushed, started to bluster, but Thurman winked at him.

"Let's go, let's go," he said, taking the arm of each. "I know what's wrong with Steve—he can't wait to see his lady love, the fair Lily Belle."

Steve Yerkes grinned as they headed toward the track.

"What holds you back?" queried Thurman. "Lord, you been trying to marry her ever since I knew you in New York!"

The grin twisted wryly. "Longer than that—clear back to before the war. Soon as I'd get rid of one obstacle another would pop up." They paused now beside the right of way. The plume of smoke from the engine's smokestack was visible in the distance. "Most headstrong woman I ever saw," Yerkes went on, half ruefully. "She's got a job of work to do before she can think of marriage now, she says."

Thurman said, "A job of work? What sort of job?"

"Got to kill a man, she claims," said Yerkes in answer, laughing. "Thinks he's out in this part of the country somewhere. Oh, well, this is big country. She'll get tired before long and I'll get her in a double harness."

The empty work train slowed to a stop in answer to their hail and the three men clambered aboard.

That evening the work train rolled into Cheyenne, and almost precisely at the same time another work train, loaded, came in from the east. A private car was attached to this train.

MISTER PARKINGTON, of the money-bags, and the lady known as Lily Belle rode in the magnificence of this car. Scarcely had they had time to repair the ravages of travel when the three promoters of Laramie City, the Future Metropolis of the West, came into the car. McMurray, not knowing Lily Belle, bowed low, in courtly manner over her hand when introduced. Parkington shook hands ceremoniously with all of them, clapped his own hands to summon a jacketed attendant, and served iced drinks.

Thurman boldly proposed a toast to Laramie City, the Queen of the West, and all of them drank with gusto. Over Parkington's shoulder Thurman winked at Yerkes, as if to say, "See, I told you so. It's all set."

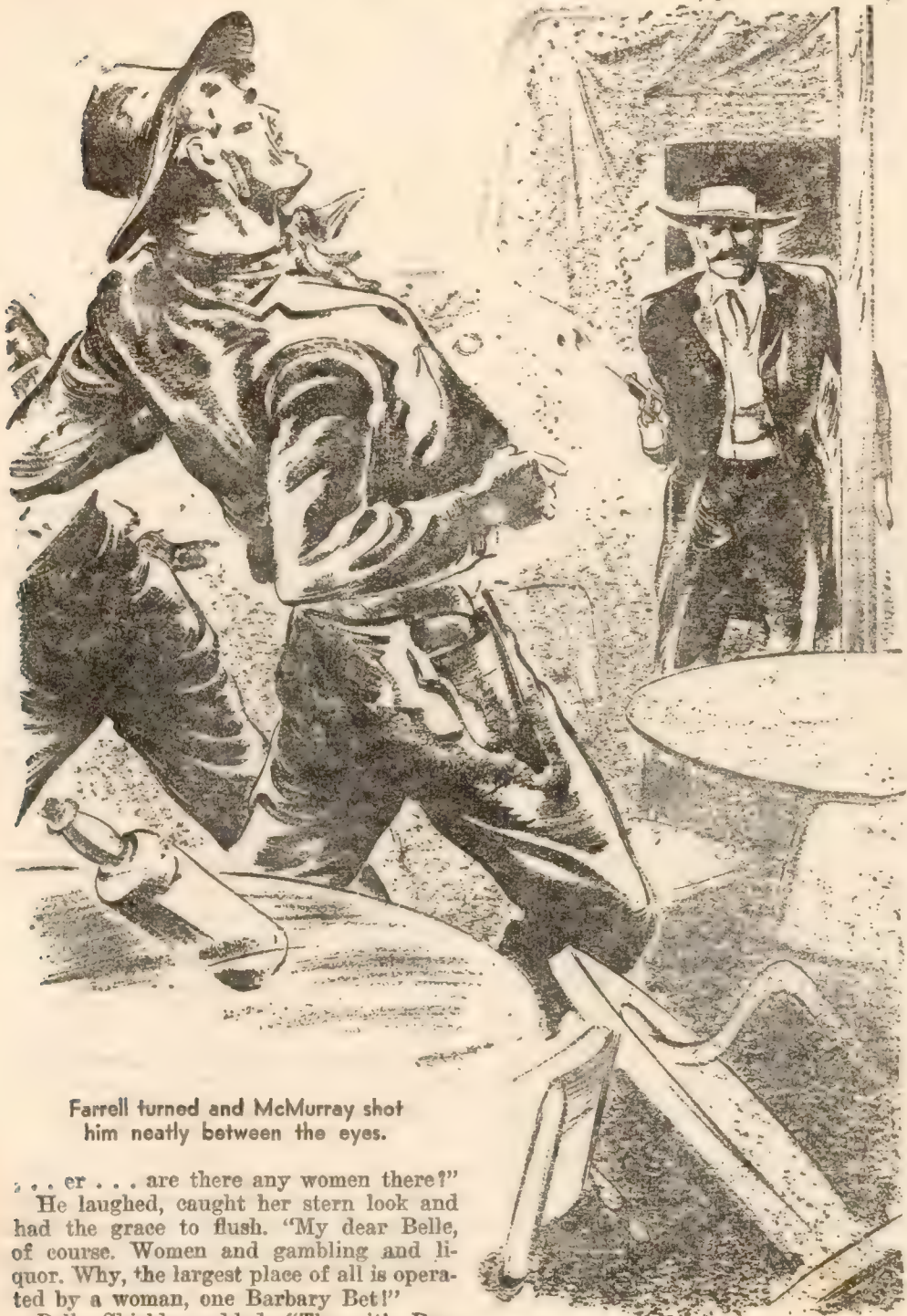
Yerkes nodded, smiled, but Lily Belle was tugging at his sleeve. They retired discreetly to a corner, where Yerkes tried to hold her hand.

She looked at him oddly, her voice was cold. "When I've done what I've set out to do, Stephen, there'll be ample time for those things. Have you heard of him this far west?"

Yerkes shook his head. "I've asked everyone I met, my dear, asked them religiously. No one out here seems to have ever heard of a Yancey Gaddison."

"Of course not," she snapped. "He'd be going under an assumed name, naturally. But have you described him to everyone?"

He nodded virtuously. She bit her lower lip. At last she spoke. "I've heard a lot about this Hell On Wheels. Do they have



Farrell turned and McMurray shot him neatly between the eyes.

... er . . . are there any women there?" He laughed, caught her stern look and had the grace to flush. "My dear Belle, of course. Women and gambling and liquor. Why, the largest place of all is operated by a woman, one Barbary Bet!" Belle Shields nodded. "Then it's Bar-

bary Bet I'll see. A man is never able to describe anything or anyone successfully. If Yancey Gaddison is in Wyoming Territory I know he's been to Hell On Wheels. He's only human!" It was her turn to flush at this, but she hurried on. "You can introduce me to Barbary Bet and I'll do the rest. She or some of the girls working for her will know him by his description."

Yerkes looked worried. "You don't think you can go to one of those girls and tell her you're looking for Yancey Gaddison in order to kill him, and expect her to tell you all about him, where he is, and all that?"

"Do I look that stupid?" She raised a white hand, tucked a stray lock of flaming hair back into place. "Women like that like tragedies. I'll pass around the story that he's my . . . I believe they say my man?"

Yerkes sighed in resignation. He knew Belle of old, knew once her mind was made up there was no changing it.

Consequently, it was only Thurman and Parkington who walked down the track to make the necessary call on General Grenville Dodge. McMurray, again stating plainly that Dodge had no use for him, went on toward Hell On Wheels to see his pardner and his old cronies. Belle, accompanied by the unwilling Yerkes, headed in the same direction, to see Barbary Bet.

THE interview with the general was short and to the point. General Dodge, unfortunately, was in a bad mood. He was lonesome for his wife back in Council Bluffs. Once some bit of attention was paid to the amenities Mister Parkington came to the point, saying pompously that the board had picked Laramie City as the logical spot for the soon-to-be-built yards and divisional point.

General Dodge reddened a bit, said coldly, "The yards and the divisional headquarters will be here in Cheyenne, Mister Parkington. I have promised that and I am a man to stand behind my promises."

"You forget that I represent the board," replied Mister Parkington, while Thurman nodded gravely and sternly.

"And you forget," thundered the general, "that I am building this railroad!"

He seized a sheet of foolscap; his pen scratched busily across it. "There, sir," he roared, "is my resignation. You can take that back to your precious board and—!"

Parkington paled. Up until the time that Dodge took over as chief engineer the Union Pacific had shown little progress. Powerful as he was, Parkington knew he dared not take the general's resignation back with him and bear the brunt of explaining the whys and wherefores of the thing.

Consequently, Parkington and Thurman practically crept out of the car with their tails between their legs.

YERKES and Belle Shields fared a bit better. At least they thought they did. Every eye in the Big Tent followed Belle as she entered on the arm of the promoter from the East. An obsequious barman hurried to find Barbary Bet, who came to the table where they sat. Stephen Yerkes introduced the two women. Afterward, Belle Shields flattered herself that she carried it off well. In fact, once or twice in the heartrending narrative of the man who did her wrong, she almost believed it herself.

Barbary Bet let twin streamers of smoke trickle from her nostrils as she kept the derision from her eyes. When the tale was over she patted the younger woman on the hand and said no, as far as she knew, no one answering the description of Yancey Gaddison had ever been in the Big Tent. She wondered if the little lady realized how the years might have changed the man she loved. Belle said she did so realize. Then she broached her plan for singing a bit at the Big Tent.

Barbary Bet, afterward, could not decide whether she was merely curious or whether she had a perverted sense of humor. At the time Belle Shields was inquiring about him, telling her false story, the man for whom she was seeking, Yancey Gaddison, lay drunken in Barbary Bet's quarters.

IN a manner of speaking, Dour Donald McMurray did not fare so well in Cheyenne, either, though at the time the circumstances thronged about him, he was positive that he did. He stopped at the outskirts of Hell On Wheels to talk to

some cronies. One of them informed him that Cliff Farrell was in town, that he was roaring drunk, and that he was cursing McMurray, with every breath he took, for killing his brother. McMurray turned it all over in his mind. Sooner or later, he realized, the younger Farrell would have to be taken care of. He inquired cautiously into the degree of Farrell's drunkenness, and, satisfied, inspected the loading of his derringer and set off purposefully in the direction of the canvas-topped saloon where Farrell was drinking.

He paused in the doorway of the tent and the crowd, seeing who it was, drew back for him. Softly, almost tenderly, he called, "You, Farrell."

Eyes glazed with drink, Farrell turned, recognized McMurray, fumbled in his shirt for his gun. McMurray shot him neatly between the eyes, blew the smoke from his derringer, reloaded, whirled on his heel and walked sedately away, a good job done.

Except for a Mexican named Pablo Gonzales, who disliked McMurray and saw the whole affair. Three minutes after McMurray left the place of the murder, Gonzales encountered Yakima Bill, who had just returned unexpectedly to town. He told him what had happened. The old plainsman hurried down the tracks to General Dodge's car, learned to his satisfaction that Ars Smith had returned from Omaha, and set off toward the Big Tent to find his friend.

THE man called Smith awakened slowly, stared straight overhead at the canvas roof in puzzled manner. His fingers felt smooth silk cushions beneath him, he turned his aching head and his eyes grew wide. Where—where? Slowly, a bit at a time, it came back to him, how he'd come to the Big Tent searching for companionship, how he'd talked to Barbary Bet, had given her a chance to profit by the certainty that Cheyenne was to have the Union Pacific shops and division headquarters. He managed to get his legs over the edge of the couch and sit up, managed, in spite of the roaring in his head, to get his boots on. He stared about at the feminine fripperies in shamefaced amazement and began to wish he could remember all that had happened.

He thought of Belle Shields again and the blackness started to descend upon him. Somehow he reeled out of the tent quarters of Barbary Bet, located the rear entrance of the Big Tent and made for it. A moment later he was leaning against the very back of the bar, waiting for a little hair of the dog that bit him.

He was vaguely conscious of Barbary Bet seated at a table not too far away from where he stood. A woman at the same table had her back to him, and badly as he felt he noted with dismay that her hair was the exact color of a newly minted penny. Consequently he took two hurried drinks rather than one, turned to observe the three at the table once more. He almost dropped the glass.

Steve Yerkes! Yerkes, a little heavier, true enough, but undoubtedly his old friend, his only friend from home—right here in Cheyenne. He glowed all over, he smiled widely in his beard. Quickly he tossed off another drink, laid a coin on the counter and started away from the bar.

Yakima Bill grasped his elbow, snarled, "Ars! Ars!" Smith tried to shake him off, then some inkling of what his old pal was trying to tell him came to his excited ears. "I tell you he deliberately murdered young Farrell. Farrell was too drunk to move and McMurray went hunting him, called him and shot him right between the eyes. Young Cliff didn't have a chance—Ars, there's McMurray now!"

Dour Donald McMurray, more than merely wellpleased with himself, swaggered in the front entrance of the Big Tent. A potentially dangerous enemy had been easily removed from his path; he was on his way to wealth as a co-promoter of the town of Laramie City; he was now about to see Barbary Bet and collect his half of the profits taken from the Big Tent during the past month or so. Life was good for McMurray at the moment.

Ars Smith, Yakima's story of murder still in his ears, saw the gambler walk half the length of the bar and stand with his hands folded behind him, teetering on his polished boots while his cold eyes searched the crowded tent. Smith's arm pushed Yakima aside, his eyes seemed to glow malevolently. Like a great cat he started for the gambler.

From her table, Barbary Bet saw the



Yerkes came through the door,
and a thick arm went about
his throat, throttling him.

scene. Inadvertently she gasped, "Smith! Smith!" Yerkes looked, pushed back his chair so suddenly that it tumbled to the floor. Belle Shields looked. Her heart turned over rapidly. At first she thought it was Yancey Gaddison, but a semi-profile view showed an enormous black beard and a crooked, scarred nose.

THERE was no word spoken. Like lightning McMurray's white hand came

from somewhere with the derringer. It barked. Smith kept coming, while McMurray, white of face, cursed his miss. He fired the second barrel of the derringer. Smith was whirled halfway around. His white teeth continued to gleam in the blackness of his beard—he never lost his smile. Nor did he, for some reason, draw a gun. Rather he kept on his slow, inexorable way toward the gambler. But now blood was visible on his left shoulder.

McMurray cursed again, flung the derringer at the advance agent of Death and from somewhere, produced a knife. He started to circle, but Smith was on him. The knife flashed. A powerful hand caught the knife wrist. McMurray's knee flew toward a seemingly unprotected groin, only to be blocked off by another knee. The

the broken arm, found a new grip on a tortured throat. Smith sank to one knee, bent the gambler back over the other knee. Back . . . back—! Now McMurray's eyes



knife arm came up behind his back. Up—up! Half doubled over, McMurray sweated in pain.

Belle Shields, fascinated, could not tear her eyes away. Steve Yerkes, perspiring as greatly as McMurray, was saying over and over, "Stop him! Why doesn't someone stop him!" But he made no move himself.

Something snapped with the flat crack of a snapping broomstick. The knife fell to the ground. The great hands released

were bulging, and his tongue was protruding—!

Smith put him down almost gently, stared down at him for a full thirty seconds before walking toward the back of the bar. Yakima Bill, gun in hand, covered his nonchalant retreat. But no man made a move to intercept him, no man made a move to avenge the dead McMurray. Smith poured himself a drink from his bottle with steady hands, tossed it off. He turned to Barbary Bet.

"Madam," he said, "you are now sole owner of the Big Tent. You are now—!"

His voice faded to nothingness, he took a step backward. The woman he loved was staring at him with wide, horrified eyes.

CHAPTER VI

Buffalo Gun

THREE DAYS LATER YAKIMA BILL, after an exhausting search, found Ars Smith camped in the shadow of a painted butte some twenty miles from Cheyenne. Smith's shoulder was stiff and sore, but it was his soul and spirit that bothered him worse than his wound. He had tried to add events together and make a logical panorama of them, with no success.

Yerkes, for example. What was he doing in Wyoming Territory. Oh, it was easy to see that he hadn't recognized Ars Smith as Yancey Gaddison, but that wasn't what bothered Smith the most. The last few letters he had received from Yerkes spoke of poverty and actual need since the carpet-baggers were running the State of Georgia and the bank was out of his hands. Yet here he was, dressed within an inch of his life. And before riding so frantically out of Cheyenne, pursued by his own conscience, he'd heard that Yerkes was associated with Parkington and Thurman.

That of course explained seeing Belle Shields with Parkington in Omaha. Was Belle in Wyoming as the wife of Yerkes, or was she still pursuing her vengeance? He did not think she had recognized him after he had killed McMurray. But he sickened, thinking that if she *did* learn who he was she would eternally put him down as a merciless, blood-maddened killer. First her brother, Kincaid Shields, then the gambler, Donald McMurray.

Yakima Bill hunkered down across the buffalo-chip fire and filled his pipe. Not until it was going did he speak. He said, "What'd you run for, Ars? Hell, everybody knows it was self-defense. He shot twice before you got to him and you never drew a gun. When you coming back to town?"

Smith shook his head and did not answer.

Yakima smoked in silence, Smith con-

tinued to stare westward at the range of purple mountains.

"Hell On Wheels moved yesterday," went on Yakima, eyeing his erstwhile pardner. There was no change of expression on the bearded face. "Barbary Bet said to tell you thanks a million if I saw you. Said you'd know what she meant. Soon as she can find a buyer for her share of the Big Tent she said she's moving back to Cheyenne from Laramie."

Smith answered, "Did Yerkes and . . . or . . . the other woman . . . did they stay in Cheyenne?"

"Nope," said Yakima. "They moved on to Laramie City with Hell On Wheels."

Smith nodded. Inwardly he was saying: *She didn't recognize me, nor did Steve!*

Yakima chuckled. "The general's been asking about you. That feller Yerkes and that Thurman and McMurray tied up with a man named Parkington. They tried to put pressure on the general to put the division point and the shops at Laramie City. Reckon the general wouldn't be pressed. They say Mister Parkington was right put-out!"

Smith nodded, absently. But the thought came to him again that it was peculiar Yerkes, a supposed broken Southerner, could raise enough money to engage in promotional operations with Eastern financiers.

ALMOST at this precise moment, Barbary Bet was plying Stephen Yerkes with liquor in Laramie City, in her own quarters, again at the rear of the Big Tent. Stephen Yerkes was not holding his liquor overly well.

Barbary Bet shrugged. "I don't know, Steve," she said musingly, "I just can't make up my mind. I want out of the business, that's true—that is, out of it actively. I need a manager who's smart. He's got to be able to—well, to handle women and to handle men. He's got to be doubly shrewd, a diplomat." She smiled knowingly and shrugged her white shoulders. "You've got to know when to lie and when to get hard and mean."

Steve Yerkes slapped himself on the chest. "Bet, I'm your man!" He took another drink, spilling a bit of it on his shirt bosom, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

She sneered. "It doesn't look to me like you know how to handle women. Take Lily Belle for example. And sinking your money here in Laramie City wasn't a very smart move, my friend."

He began to bluster. He slapped the table with the palm of his hand, hurriedly snatched the bottle that tipped over and poured himself another drink.

"Listen," he boasted. "I'll tell you how I'm handling Lily Belle! And as far as money is concerned, what other Georgia banker came out of the war with several hundred thousand dollars? Tell me that! You just listen to me——!"

He talked for a full half hour, punctuating his harangue with frequent drinks. Barbary Bet, hard as she was, sickened at his recital, yet she kept her face straight. When he had finished his bragging story she said, "And what will you do if you ever run into this Yancey Gaddison, my friend?"

Yerkes smirked. "Haven't I got two outs? I can notify the authorities that a murderer can be arrested, or I can arrange it so Belle meets him. He wouldn't raise his hand to her. A southern gentleman! The fool! He'd stand still and let her put a knife in him." He laughed uproariously. "I hope I do find him!"

Only the Maker can peer into the heart of a woman. Most certainly Barbary Bet had no intentions of ratting on the man who had enabled her to make a great deal of money in Cheyenne. Afterward, thinking it over, she decided she did what she did on the spur of the moment just to see this worm of a man, this betrayer of all who trusted him, cringe and slink away, palsied with fright.

She blurted, "The man Ars Smith, General Dodge's trouble-shooter, is the man you're looking for. *He's Yancey Gaddison!*"

Never had she seen a man grow sober so quickly. Yerkes shoved back from the table convulsively. His chair overturned, the bottle rolled unheeded to the ground. His face was pasty-white, his eyes protruded. In his mind's eye he was seeing Dour Donald McMurray bent relentlessly backward over Smith's knee as sinewy fingers throttled the life from his body.

And he'd admitted to this woman all that he'd done!

He turned and staggered from the tent on frightened feet.

MISTER PARKINGTON paced the floor of his car angrily. "We've got to find a way to put pressure on Dodge," he said for the dozenth time, pounding a doubled fist into an open palm.

Thurman nodded. Yerkes wiped his brow with a silk handkerchief. And inspiration came to him.

He said, "Thurman, I've heard that this man Ars Smith, Dodge's so called trouble-shooter, has more influence with the general than any man alive. Suppose we persuaded him to go to Dodge for us and tell him, as a matter of life and death, that the shops and division point should come here rather than to Cheyenne?"

Parkington laughed. "I've had a few dealings with Smith. He seems to be the general's most rabid follower. Just how would you go about forcing a man of his caliber to do your bidding?"

"I think," rejoined Yerkes, "it can be accomplished." He launched into his plan and as he gave details, Parkington and Thurman stared at him in amazement.

When he had finished, Parkington said, "It may be grasping at a straw, but we've got to do something!"

ARS SMITH sat at a table in the Dutchman's in Cheyenne, sat brooding and alone. He saw the two heavily armed strangers come in, but not knowing them, they attracted no more than his passing attention. He was toying with a glass on the wet table top when a voice said, "Hello, Yancey. It's been a long time, hasn't it?"

Stephen Yerkes, a little white-faced and with a few beads of perspiration on his brow, slid into the chair opposite him. . . .

Back in Laramie City, a frightened dance-hall girl stared down at Barbary Bet, who lay with bandaged head and white face on the silken cushions of her bed. "Is she going to die?" gasped the girl to the bearded frontier doctor.

Bet's eyes came open, slowly. "You're damned right I'm not going to die," she managed, weakly. "It'll take more than a cracked skull to put me under. You, Mary, let me see that handkerchief you found on the floor."

The dance-hall girl gave her the dirty silk handkerchief which had been wrapped about the length of iron used by Bet's assailant. Bet smiled a little grimly as she saw the monogram. It was S.P.Y.—Stephen Yerkes.

She said, "Send someone down to Cheyenne to find Ars Smith. I've got a lot of things to tell that gentleman. . . ."

In Cheyenne Smith stared at Yerkes so steadily that the fat man began to tremble. He said, "Watch yourself, Yancey. You're covered from the bar and you're covered from behind you."

Smith looked from the bar to the area behind him, saw the two strangers covering him. He said, "I don't believe even you would do anything to Belle, Yerkes. You've always loved her."

Yerkes' voice was bitter. "Maybe you're right, but I know when I'm whipped. There's nothing there for me, it's all too obvious. Right or wrong it's always been you, Gaddison. No, I'm afraid we do mean it. We've got her safely tucked away, and you'll never see her again unless you do as you're told."

Smith said, "You don't know Dodge. He wouldn't listen to me any more than he'd listen to Parkington."

Yerkes grinned. "You're quite a killer, Yancey, aren't you? Suppose the general signed the necessary order and then—shall we say—met with an accident?"

He stood up quickly as it seemed that Yancey Gaddison was coming over the table after him in spite of the two armed strangers.

Gaddison sat back down at the table, poured himself another drink. At last, he said, "There's nothing much I can do, is there, Yerkes? Suppose I go down now and see the general."

Yerkes arose. "No tricks, Yancey. We've got you and you know it. Maybe you could kill me, maybe you could do it right now, but you'd never find where we've got Belle if you did!"

Smith also arose. There was a tired droop to his shoulders. "All right, Yerkes. I know what I've got to do. Give me half an hour."

He left the saloon. Yerkes remained seated at the table, but signaled his two thugs, who followed Yancey Gaddison, alias Smith, at a safe distance. Yancey made di-

rectly for the private car that served as General Dodge's office.

A full hour later he was back at the Dutchman's. Yerkes waited until he was seated at the table. He said, "Well?"

Gaddison sighed, a beaten man. "The general agrees to do anything I asked. I told him what was necessary, Yerkes. It's all here in writing, with his signature."

He exhibited a manila envelope with the imprint and seal of the Union Pacific Railroad. Yerkes reached for it.

"Oh, no! I don't trust you that far. You don't dare do a damned thing to me here, Yerkes. There'll be a work train going to Laramie in the morning and we'll ride that. When I find Belle safe and sound you'll get the order, but not until then."

Around eight that night a train came in from Laramie, bound back to Omaha for supplies. Yakima Bill got off the train. The dance-hall girl, dispatched by Barbary Bet to find Ars Smith, had succeeded in part. There in Laramie she had found Yakima Bill, and the old buffalo hunter was now in search of his friend.

But, to his surprise, when Ars was located at the Dutchman's, he shook his head violently and winked, showing that under no circumstances did he wish to be disturbed. . . .

Next evening the loaded work train pulled into the tent city of Laramie and the strangely assorted group alighted. Stephen Yerkes was in the lead, Ars Smith behind him, the two gunmen bringing up the rear. As they walked toward the front of the train, toward the tent city itself, Yakima Bill dropped out of a laden gondola and fell in some hundred yards behind. He skulked along until he saw they were headed toward the place whose sign read, LARAMIE CITY DEVELOPMENT COMPANY. Then, still puzzled, Bill sped toward the Big Tent to report to Barbary Bet.

YANCEY GADDISON held the sealed envelope in his hand and smiled disconsolately at the three promoters. Parkington said, "I'll have that order, sir."

Yancey shook his head. "Gentlemen, you've got to fulfill your part of the bargain or you've got to kill me to get possession of this. Surely you realize my helplessness. There's nothing I can do; I'm wanted for murder, as Yerkes will explain.

But at least play fair with me. Let me see Belle."

Parkington nodded to Yerkes, who smiled. "Just a minute," he said. He went through the rear entrance and into a clapboard shed adjoining. Light came from a dirty kerosene lantern. Belle Shields was bound to a dirty cot. Yerkes took a long bladed knife from his pocket, cut her bonds. Wearily she sat up.

He said, softly, "In just a minute, the man you've searched for all these years is going to walk in here. Do you understand, Belle? Yancey Gaddison, the man who killed your brother in cold blood." He placed the knife on an upturned box and went out of the shed.

For long moments she stared at the gleaming knife. The crude door opened and a man stood there, his eyes appealing to her.

She grasped the handle of the knife, rose to her feet.

"It's been a long time, Belle," he said softly.

She came toward him, the knife raised, poised. For a moment there was madness in her eyes as the knife gleamed above his throat. He made no move to protect himself. And gradually the knife came down—dropped to the floor of the shed from her nerveless fingers.

"God! After all this time! And I can't do it!" She swayed, would have fallen had he not caught her. For a moment he held her close, whispering in her ear. He picked up the knife, stood close to the door. At a nod from him, she screamed wildly, and he added his own voice to the uproar.

The door flew open, a grinning Yerkes appeared, expecting to see murder. Instead, a thick arm went about his throat, throttling him. A sinewy hand sought for and found the derringer in his sleeve.

From the main building came Parkington's voice: "Damn it, Yerkes, there's nothing in this sealed envelope but a blank piece of paper! He's fooled us—he isn't dead, is he?"

"Nope," said Yancey, from the door, "I'm not dead. Certainly the paper is blank. With General Dodge's help I think I've got you where I—my God, what's that?"

Yakima Bill grinned in the front door, and coming into view like Cleopatra on

her barge was Barbary Bet, sitting on her cushioned couch which was borne by four husky men.

She said, "Gentlemen, is it a party?"

There was no answer from anyone present. She shrugged, said, "Yerkes, you didn't do a very good job of killing me, did you?" Her rings glittered as she raised her hand to stop him. "Don't bother denying it. We found your handkerchief. Besides, you had more motive than anyone else."

Yerkes' face was pasty-white, his eyes went frantically around the tent.

"I see you found your man," said Barbary Bet, dryly, to Belle Shields. "You didn't put a knife in him?"

Barbary Bet smiled. "Yerkes tried to kill me, dearie, because I got him to boasting about his past exploits. His bank wasn't located by the Federals—was it, Yerkes?" There was no answer. "Right from the start he figured the South had no chance, so he played both ends against the middle. He didn't try to get silver and specie out by boat—oh, no! He managed to get it safely North!"

Gaddison loosed Yerkes, pushed him. He fell on his knees in the center of the tent.

Barbary Bet said:

"You may be a little more interested, Miss Shields, to know that Yerkes bragged to me that it was he, not Gaddison, that killed your brother. He knew Gaddison was too drunken ever to know the difference. Your appearance in the door of the room simply furthered his plan. Also, Gaddison has sent you money many times in the past few years, and Yerkes boasted that he was careful that you never heard of it."

That was the breaking point for Stephen Yerkes. With an animal-like cry he scuttled out of the tent and headed for far horizons.

Yakima Bill spat tobacco juice into the dust, slowly raised the heavy buffalo gun. Its roar filled the tent. Yerkes' running figure disappeared, diving forward as if slapped by some gigantic hand.

The faint crack that followed was Barbary Bet striking a match. She lit her cheroot, blew the smoke from her nostrils. "All right, boys," she said to her bearers, "let's go. You've seen a little Wyoming history made right here. But it's the end of the line for Yerkes and this crooked gang!"



The Father Bear's Cub

THE argument at the other end of the bar had quieted the saloon and Kyle Mellott, drinking alone, saw again the familiar division of all trail towns.

It was cattlemen against tradesmen and townsmen with the ranchers swinging the heaviest club because the town depended upon their favors.

The handful of Custer-town men made their uneasy shift toward the door and the dozen riders at the card tables grinned wickedly.

A big, florid ranchman who leaned backward on the bar, commanding the room's attention, dominated the argument.

The description tallies, was Mellott's

"When a man can't graze his spread, that spread becomes open range," Fitch said. "And I don't explain my actions to a man selling tanglefoot by the drink to make his living!"



Firing as they rode, the Circle-T broke into the battle.

thought. This one would be Moss Fitch, the Circle-T boss; greedy and ruthless, his big-framed body running now too much to belly from little time in the saddle.

Glaring eye to eye with Fitch and plainly unintimidated was the emerald-eyed man who must surely own the name printed on the swinging sign outside the bat-

By FREDERICK W. BALES

wings—proclaiming this O'CONNELL'S SALOON.

"Blast your Irish suspicions, O'Connell!" Fitch blustered. "Circle-T plans to rob no one, least of all the Benedicts! I'm offering the old man a price for his pride, for he has no cow spread to sell. Star Box is trying to outbid me. That's the story!"

"The toe of me boot to ye, Moss Fitch, for it's a liar I think ye to be! If ye or Fat Frank Millikan of Star Box were square cowmen ye'd stake Luther Benedict till he was back ag'in on his two feet! Not offer to buy what ain't for sale!"

Fitch purpled and half raised his hand as if to strike the Irishman. Several of the cowprods rose to their feet, scraping their chairs softly.

The Circle-T boss finally let his breath out in a bubbling sigh and backed a step away from the bar.

"I don't explain my actions to a man selling tanglefoot by the drink to make his living," Fitch rumbled. "When a man can't graze his spread, that spread becomes open range. Benedict is lucky to even get an offer for his busted ranch."

"And for Dutchman's Springs?" O'Connell asked sarcastically.

Kyle saw rancher Fitch stiffen as if he had been hit over the belt and at that moment a tall, red-eyed Circle-T hand gurgled a curse and pawed his gun from its holster.

"O'Connell, you can't talk to my boss thataway!" the cowboy stuttered drunkenly. "I'm gonna shoot at your buttons until your skin falls off!"

Fitch moved his big bulk swiftly out of range and there was a tawny eagerness in his expression; and Kyle had the vague, surprised knowledge that the rancher was hoping his befuddled rider would actually shoot.

KYLE took one long step as his hand whisked to the .44 on his flank; his arm whipped up and down again, his gun barrel cracking sharply on the cowpoke's wrist. Kyle saw the other's gun fly from the numbed hand, sliding across the floor to Moss Fitch's feet—and saw the bulky man look down at it with oddly surprised eyes.

Kyle scratched his chin abstractedly with the .44's muzzle and his eyes slid over the circle of frozen faces around the barroom.

The over-zealous Circle-T puncher weaved gently on his feet, blinking stupidly as Kyle said softly, "Never shoot a barkeep. They belong to the nobility."

The speculative sigh floating over the saloon was broken by the Irishman's outraged howl as he slapped a shotgun down on the bar.

"That tears it! Fitch, take your murtherin' pack and git out! Never come back except wit' your hats in your hands! That goes for any Circle-T or Star Box man who don't want to git pitched out by the seat of the pants!"

"I'm apologizing, O'Connell," Fitch said with heavy remorse. "That damned drunk, Rogers! I'll give him his time for that trick." He waved imperiously to his men and they trooped out grumbling; and Fitch stopped, stabbing a shrewd look at Kyle through the fleshy sacks around his eyes.

"Good work, friend," he said. "I like a man to act quick in a nasty spot. Wouldn't be looking for a job, would you?"

Kyle holstered his six-gun, answering easily, "Maybe. Maybe not."

"If you're interested there's room for your saddle on Circle-T's kak-pole," the cattleman ogled. "I didn't get your name, friend?"

Kyle grinned. "You will—if I apply for a job."

He watched the rebuffed cattleman stomp out and poured another drink from the bottle in front of him; and he thought with satisfaction that in his dirty waist overalls, blue denim jumper, battered flat-crowned hat and low-slung gun he had successfully passed muster as a horizon-hungry saddle tramp.

Kyle sensed O'Connell's darting glances. The Irish apron's curiosity was held in check by his prairie-wise discretion.

So Kyle invited: "Go ahead and say it. Where did you see me before?"

"The same black hair, the same bent nose like a fighting hawk's and the same eyes which can be green like a cat's or blue like a woman's when she's in love." The

Irishman's eyes grew somberly soft. "But it's near twenty years ago when Square John Mellott rode tall in the saddle, afore he got hisself city-broke."

"I'm Kyle Mellott. I'm packing dad's favorite gun," and Kyle silenced the saloonman's joyful bellow by a quick motion of his hand. "There's no one in the Muscleshell country who knows that but you. And that's the way we leave it until I draw to my hand."

THE lights blinked out in O'Connell's Saloon, and in a shuttered rear room the Irishman put a bottle of rich old rye between them on a table, lighted a stubby pipe and said, "I'm not pryin', mind ye, young Mellott, but in your eye is the bold look Square John used to be showin' whin he was pitchin' into somebody else's fight. The divilish look of a buck in ruttin' season."

Kyle's story was brief. Square John Mellott one day had heard his mule-skinners gossiping in the wagon yards at Fort Peck where Mellot & Sons' freight wagons and stagecoaches harbored after their long hauls. Trail talk had it, said the teamsters, that the Twin Bells Ranch was bankrupt.

Sixteen years earlier Square John had owned a half interest in the Twin Bells brand and title to its magic water source, Dutchman's Springs.

Lured by the commercial promise of freight routes from Fort Peck throughout Montana into the Dakotas and Wyoming, he had sold his holdings to his partner, Luther Benedict.

Ill luck, several bad seasons, mysterious disappearances of his cattle, coupled with an injury which had left him crippled, had ruined Benedict. A crew he could no longer pay had drifted to other jobs. Only Benedict's daughter, Martha, and one loyal and hard-bitten cowhand, Giles Marcus, remained to operate what was left of Twin Bells.

O'Connell rumbled deep in his throat and nodded. This part of Kyle's story he knew well.

Building a quirly, Kyle continued:

"Dad still likes a scrap—with me, his favorite trouble-shooter, doing the swinging. When he heard that Fitch of Circle-

T and Millikan of Star Box were trying to push Benedict into selling the deed to the Springs and quitting, he sent me down here."

O'Connell raised a cautioning finger. "As ye know, the Springs was once surveyed railroad property, granted by government right to the Kansas & Western. Your Dad and Luther bought the title when the steam-engine people decided to lay their tracks somewheres else. The deed's iron-bound. But Fitch and Millikan are cunning divils. They'll move on Twin Bells grass and claim it's open range."

Kyle said humorously, "The old Father Bear thought of that one, too. A few weeks ago he wrote to a friend, Ed Charles, a Billings cattle buyer. Had Ed round up two hundred maverick yearlings and put the Twin Bells iron on 'em. That herd's been started overland and will hit the Muscleshell country any minute now. Benedict don't know it yet but Dad's staking him to a new start. There's going to be cattle again on Twin Bells grass!"

O'Connell thrust out a brawny, freckled hand. "Son, you're touchin' a match to a powder keg. And I'll be backin' ye when th' explosion comes! What do ye do next?"

"You heard Fitch offer me a job. I'm ridin' to Circle-T in the morning to have the pleasure of turning it down. . . ."

KYLE left Custer's sagging, paintless hotel before dawn, rousing a grouchy hostler at the livery stable; and Kyle rode his big bay through the sleeping town toward the broad valley of the Muscleshell River.

The morning sun was just beginning to whip a sullen valley fog into flight an hour later when he rode through a cluster of haystacks into the Circle-T ranchyard.

Kyle calmly tied his horse to a cottonwood, followed the smell of frying bacon to the cook shack, tossed his hat on a wall peg and sat down at a table already surrounded by hungry Circle-T riders. They gaped at him in stunned amazement.

"The guest plate, cookie," Kyle announced to that pop-eyed individual and then looked with bland innocence at the bemused rannies around the table.

One slat-thin man banged down his coffee cup irritably and said:

"Ah, the Fancy Dan with the quick gun hand is takin' up Fitch's offer of a job. Eat hearty, friend. It's gonna be a tough day on you."

Kyle drawled, "I'll eat hearty. Then I'll decide how tough the day'll be. Always sample an outfit's grub before I take a job. If the grub don't suit me, the job don't suit either."

One chunky rider choked on his biscuit. The others exchanged thoughtful glances and resumed eating, and across the room the cook snarled profanely.

The others finished their breakfasts and trudged out, silent and speculative, and as Kyle sighed happily, "More coffee, cookie," the fuming Circle-T dough-roller said fiercely:

"I hope you choke! and I've got my opinion of Moss Fitch, even if he is my boss—importin' a paid gun-slinger to do Circle-T's dirty work! I ain't fooled none! Knew you was the gent Moss hired when you walked in, so all-fired importantlike!"

An icy shock came up Kyle's back and he quickly ducked his head over his plate to hide the surprise he knew must be showing in his face.

"I'm agin' bushwackin' and derved if I'm proud to be dishin' out good food to them as does it!" the garrulous cook continued, banging the stove viciously with a skillet. "They think I don't know what Moss and those plug-uglies he calls his crew have hatched up. They know Frank Millikan has been in Miles City checkin' to make sure that tittle Luther Benedict holds to Dutchan's Springs is iron-bound. They know Frank offered Luther five thousand for the deed and that by now Frank's burnin' leather for Twin Bells Ranch to hike his bid!"

The cook straddled challengingly before Kyle like an old but undaunted rooster. "They know Luther Benedict sits on his porch each morning to watch the sunup and that's where you'll kill him, mister, as Moss Fitch hired you to do! So that Moss can ride in, tell Martha Benedict that Millikan's Star Box men did the killin' and then buy her out when she's alone and whipped and ready to sell!"

Kyle pushed his chair back slowly and without a word to the surprised cook walked to the door, rage burning a deadly fire within him. The verbose ruler of Circle-T's kitchen had unwittingly revealed the ruthless Fitch's plan for the final destruction of Twin Bells Ranch.

As he walked toward his horse a Circle-T hand with a Texas drawl yelled, "Fitch is in Custer town to meet a fella, *amigo*, if you're wantin' to see Fitch to tell him you're signin' up."

Kyle looked down from his saddle into the faces of the idling ranch crew.

"I said I'd take a job if I liked the grub. I'm used to froglegs and lemon pie for breakfast. Didn't see none on the table. Nope, gents, Circle-T just won't do."

He waved blithely and rode away. Looking back, he saw the ranch cook, obviously dazed, standing in the door of the cook-shack, scratching in frantic puzzlement at his bald spot.

KYLE pushed his big bay hard along the valley's edge toward Star Box land. A plume of dust approaching from down the trail took the shape of a buckboard and team. The driver of the wagon was Moss Fitch. Kyle cursed softly. He would have preferred avoiding Fitch now, for the Circle-T man's suspicions might be easily aroused.

Sitting beside Fitch was a sleepy-eyed man in black; a pale man with a trap-tight mouth whose long hands, resting on his knees, were white and soft and almost artistic-looking. Kyle took a long breath as recognition came.

Square John Mellott had once pointed out Pete Scarlet to Kyle.

Scarlet, a former Fort Peck marshal who now rode outside the law, was a nerveless killer whose guns were for hire, and Kyle saw the man's pale eyes flick up at him and drop away again as Fitch hauled his team to a halt.

"You looking for me, boy? About a job on Circle-T?"

Kyle's struggle to hold his anger made his voice rocky and blunt:

"Something about your job stinks. Fitch! As for looking for you—I've got a hunch I will be soon!"



"Welcome to Twin Bells spread, cowboy. I'm Martha Benedict."

Kyle put the bay into a run past the buckboard and he saw Pete Scarlet's look lift and follow him. The cold conviction came now that Scarlet had recognized him and that his own hand was exposed; that the final showdown for Twin Bells would not be long in coming.

He rode into a narrow canyon, still un-

touched by the morning sun, and he pushed through its chill a half hour and found a trail which led into Star Box Ranch at the end of a horse pasture.

The place, despite Fat Frank Millikan's affluence, was untidy and apparently deserted. A negro cook came from a shanty with a bucket of slops, raising startled

white eyeballs to Kyle's question, "Where's the boss?"

The cook motioned with his eyes past a scatter of ranch buildings toward a grove of jackpine on the slopes. The sparse timber shaded a long, shedlike ranch house. Two trees supported a barrel-stave hammock, and reclining there was a vast ball of a man.

Kyle did not dismount; he rode over until he could look down at Millikan. The man suddenly opened big blue eyes in a direct stare and Kyle had the sudden knowledge that the Star Box owner was not as lethargic and lazy as he acted.

Kyle said, "Lay quiet and listen, friend. I don't know you except by name. But I am a gent who has decided the Museleshell country is unhealthy, for I can smell powder before it is burned."

Fat Frank waved a fly away from his nose. "Talk some more, stranger," he said.

"I ate Circle-T grub this morning. It gave me the bellyache. So did some news I heard there. Fitch has taken on a new hand. Pete Scarlet!" He saw Millikan's eyes flicker. He crowded the fat man's thoughts with his words:

"It wouldn't surprise me none if some cowman—I heard his name was Benedict—is being disgraced. It would surprise me less if Fitch lets the word drop around that Star Box was to blame."

Kyle wheeled his mount and moved across the ranchyard, calling back over his shoulder, "Pleasant dreams!"

Fat Frank did not move except to settle more comfortably in his hammock. His eyes were thoughtfully skyward. But when Kyle looked back from the trail which skirted the elbow of the Bluestones range leading toward Twin Bells Ranch, the hammock was empty.

THE flatlands dipped ahead of Kyle as he rode, gradually spooning up familiar scenes of his early boyhood. Twin Bells Ranch was a small weathered place built of logs with thick plank walls; a square and neat and practical place, its few trees tall and startling on the bare face of the tableland.

Kyle skirted the barns and rode into the shaded yard. He noticed curtains at

the ranchhouse windows, remembering with a sense of shock that a woman, Luther Benedict's daughter Martha, would be touched by whatever violence lay ahead.

A long, slanted lean-to, apparently a kitchen, was built on the rear of the house and someone stepped out of it as Kyle rode up; someone wearing levis, calfskin vest and scuffed, work-worn boots. Someone, Kyle realized with belated interest, who was obviously very attractive and feminine despite her attire.

Her low-crowned hat had fallen from her head onto her shoulders, anchored by its chin-strap. Her chestnut-colored hair was parted at one side and done in a thick club on the back. Kyle pulled off his sombrero as he slid from the saddle.

Martha's eyes were a rich blue, almost black, and they studied Kyle now entirely unalarmed and with a shyly sober welcome. Her words came in a soft contralto:

"Welcome to Twin Bell spread, cowboy. I'm Martha Benedict. Dad's on the front porch."

Before Kyle could answer, a harsh voice came floating from the other side of the house:

"Somebody to see me, Martha? Tell him I'm here in front—forkin' a wooden bronc—a danged dead man's horse!"

"He means his chair," Martha began softly.

But Kyle wasn't listening. He was studying a high, jutting shelf covered with sage and chaparral thickets on the footslopes beyond the ranch buildings. A rifle slug could easily reach the porch from there. He thought of the bitter indictment of the Circle-T cook and broke into a run. . . .

The thin, fierce-eyed man with bristly white hair and brows, who sat rebelliously in his rocker, shrilled sparkling curses when Kyle lifted him, chair and all, and carried him inside the house.

Just as he stepped across the threshold an unseen bullet hit the log wall a foot away; a fraction of a second later the high, spiteful voice of a Remington rifle spoke from the rimrock. Kyle made a long reach through the door, grabbing Martha's arm and hauling her inside.

Luther Benedict's flailing voice suddenly faded. He gazed out through the door

with angry disbelief and, at last, with understanding. Wearily he hitched up the blanket on his knees, as if for protection. On his daughter's face was the sick look of fright.

Kyle said, "Take it easy, folks. I figured that was coming! That's why I didn't explain. If I hadn't moved quick, you'd be dead, Luther Benedict, and the Circle-T or Stai Box would be fighting over our Twin Bells' bones. But they made their play too late!"

"Who are you?" Martha demanded.

Kyle said, "Name of Mellott. The Father Bear's ornery cub."

Old Luther howled explosively and half arose on his crippled legs.

"Square John's kid! You're Kyle Benedict!"

Kyle gripped Luther's hand and turned to Martha apologetically. "I didn't take time to introduce myself outside," he said, grinning. "Dad told me once he bet you'd grow up to be the prettiest girl in Montana. I'll be glad to tell him he was right."

THE warm magic of the moment was shattered by the thudding sound of horsemen sweeping in and stopping at the rear of the ranchhouse. Kyle jerked up his .44 as heavy footfalls pounded through the lean-to.

A towering cowpuncher, blackly unshaven and looking doubly malevolent because of a flat, long-broken nose, burst into the room. Behind him was O'Connell, the saloonkeeper, and the Irishman sang out warningly, "Stand hitched, boys! Leggo that hawgleg, Mellott! This here's Giles Marcus. Tell 'em what you saw, Giles!"

The big puncher strode to a window at the side of the room, throwing open the shutters. He beckoned Martha and waited until Kyle and O'Connell moved Luther's rocking-chair close. They let their eyes follow his pointing finger across Twin Bells' heaving meadows where the timberline joined the valley floor.

A high, boiling dust cloud hovered there.

"It's a drift of cattle from the trail to Billings," Marcus said. "They're already on our range. I was fixin' to ride down for a look-see when I meets O'Connell."

The Irishman spoke up. "Leave the herd



"Fill your hands as you turn,"
the words came to him.

alone, lad, says I, and git your warpaint on. There's trouble on Twin Bells. Now tell 'em, Mellott."

"Twin Bells grass is under graze again," Kyle said, turning to Luther and Martha. "Those are Ed Charles's men bringing them in. It's dad's share of the bet, Luther, that you'll whip Moss Fitch and Millikan."

A sigh of fathomless wonder and gratitude came from the white-haired man in the rocker and his hands trembled upward to cover his face. Marcus and O'Connell awkwardly shuffled out and Kyle also turned, respecting Luther's emotion; and suddenly the shining-eyed Martha was before Kyle and her hands were on his cheeks. She raised swiftly on her toes and kissed him on the mouth, and Kyle stood pleasantly hypnotized for a moment; aware that there was a ragged, insistent sound in his ears of gunfire somewhere outside.

"Mellott! Mellott!" came O'Connell's thick warning.

Kyle reached the porch in a jump. Giles Marcus stood in the yard, facing the Blue-stones slopes; his thumbs hooked in his belt above two dangling six-guns and there was something angry and eager in his stance.

O'Connell, a rifle in his hands, was settling behind a water trough. The barkeep hummed softly to himself as he loaded his gun.

A mile away a line of riders charged down the slopes. They came from a timber-

ed shortcut to Circle-T and hitting their flank, along the pastures was another boiling calvacade of horsemen led by a gross, gesticulating man on a white horse.

Fat Frank Millikan's cowprods were firing as they rode and Kyle saw Moss Fitch's Circle-T crew's descent break into a frenzied whirl for cover in the timbers. He heard Martha at his elbow say wonderingly, "It's the Star Box crew fighting Fitch's crew!"

"I stacked it that way," Kyle answered, and he added grimly, "But one side will lose. Then we're next!" He thought of Ed Charles's trail men from Billings. They would be handy men in a scrap. He grabbed Martha's hand and ran across the yard toward his ground-hitched bay.

"Ride toward the herd," he told the girl. "Tell those waddies to unlimber their cutters and prod it!"

He watched Martha away on her pounding run down the valley, and at O'Connell's bitter cry turned to watch the battle in the timbers.

THREE of Millikan's men were unhorsed and a puff of smoke on the rimrock, where a Circle-T bushwhacker had missed his try for Luther Benedict, gave Kyle his answer.

The scalding fire from the timber and the rifleman on the rimrock melted the Star Box temper and the balloon-like Millikan gestured his riders into a pell-mell retreat.

Circle-T's crew poured down the slopes, grouping on the flats for a war parley, and Kyle knew Moss Fitch was centered in the huddle. Kyle traded mystified looks with Giles and O'Connell as the bunch moved back slowly into the timber's edge.

"That ain't Fitch's way," Giles complained. "He keeps sluggin' when a fight goes his way. What's his play, Mellott?"

"It's this, my friends! And don't move! Don't even breathe! Or think!"

It was a very cold, dry voice behind them and Kyle knew a dismal self-disgust. *He had been outsmarted!* The chuckle which he heard was like glass breaking under one's heel as Moss Fitch's hired gunman, Pete Scarlet, said:

"Yes, Mellott, the cook told us he yam-

mered to you. That was one of Fitch's waddies up on the rock with the rifle—not me! I slipped in the back way during the fun. You're at the end of your rope, Mellott. Tell your boys to drop their cutters on the ground. Then I'm giving you the chance to turn and draw."

Kyle watched Marcus reluctantly lift his twin guns, hold them stubbornly for a second, and drop them; and he saw the big man's body sag as if under the weight of self-hate.

There was the whisper of an Irish curse as O'Connell's rifle thumped flatly down.

"Fill your hand as you turn, Mellott," Pete Scarlet's mocking voice intoned and Kyle let the words slide by as he listened to a rustle across the meadows which would mean Martha and Ed Charles' riders streaking toward the ranch.

"Let your cards lay, Kyle!"

It was a crackling voice somewhere inside the house, giving a high warning signal, and on the echoes of it a gun exploded.

Kyle spun into a crouch as he batted at his gun and he saw Pete Scarlet standing rigidly in the doorway, a stunned, baffled look on his face. He held a gun in his hands but as Kyle watched, it slipped from nerveless fingers and bounced on the porch.

A ghastly grin spread across Scarlet's face.

"Bushwhacked by a cripple! Might have known he had a gun under his blanket! Tell Fitch, Mellott! Good joke . . . joke . . . on . . . us!"

The gunman pitched downward on his face and Kyle leaped over his body into the house. Luther Benedict sat there in his rocker. He was sliding an ancient .45 back beneath the blanket over his knees. Smoke feathered upward from its muzzle.

A HIGH-PITCHED, triumphant yell came from the timberline and Kyle saw the Circle-T band break out and charge across the meadow. The pattern was taking shape. Moss Fitch had been listening for the sound of shots which were to have told him that Luther Benedict and Kyle Mellott were dead; that Pete Scarlet had delivered Twin Bells Ranch into Circle-T's hands.

Kyle shouted a warning to Marcus and O'Connell as he charged into the yard; then stopped amazed as the Circle-T men pulled up and milled uneasily about. Now they moved frantically back as a charging wall of cattle, driven by three whooping riders, a girl and two men, rolled over the flats between the ranchyard and the foothills.

Martha and the grinning Billings riders swung back and came pounding into the yard and Kyle stepped quickly back into the house, lifting Pete Scarlet's body from the doorsill.

From his rocking chair Luther rasped quietly:

"Moss will play the hand out now, son. I'd think kindly of you if you'd slide an old man over to the window where he might pay his respects to Circle-T." Luther's old six-gun was again on his lap, above his blanket.

Kyle whispered, "Let Moss talk. He'll answer questions we haven't asked him."

Moss Fitch raised a commanding hand to halt his pack at the edge of the yard. He looked warily around the place, then nodded and his riders swung to the ground with him, walking purposefully toward Martha Benedict.

Fitch's eyes glinted balefully as Marcus and O'Connell drifted apart and idled to the flanks of the bunched Circle-T men; and they squinted uncertainly at the two tall, strange riders who had accompanied the cattle drive and who now stepped with a certain taut sureness up behind the girl who commanded the Twin Bells guns.

"Just heard this morning that Fat Frank Millikan was crowding you, Miss Martha," Moss said heavily. "So I moved in. I'm bettering any offer he's made and I'm not standing by to see him scare you with gunplay. Hiring paid fanners is Frank's way. I tried to get here in time to save your dad and young Mellott."

Martha's body stiffened and Kyle choked down the impulse to shout his reassurance to her. The girl threw a quick look toward O'Connell and the imperturbable Irishman calmly scratched the seat of his pants. The gesture was cocksure; it was ridiculously and derisively comforting, and Kyle grinned as he saw Martha regain her control

and fiercely face Moss.

"You said you'd moved in, Moss Fitch," she said. "Now move out again! This is not open range, for it's Twin Bells cattle now grazing it!"

"But, girl, you're done!" Fitch protested. "Your dad and Mellott can't help you now!" His look became ugly and temper pushed his voice as he demanded, "Or shall I call Pete Scarlet and let him explain why?"

Kyle framed himself in the doorway, throwing his voice across the yard toward Fitch.

"Pete Scarlet is dead, Fitch! And so are you——!"

Moss made a slow, ponderous turn, as if something incomprehensible had bludgeoned him; a look of horrified dismay tore over his fleshy features as Luther Benedict's voice barked from inside the house:

"You're plumb undressed, Moss; your face is showin'! Now grab for your cutter!"

Fitch's draw was lightning-fast and his bullet put its breath on Kyle's cheek. Kyle pulled his own gun slowly and deliberately and Fitch fired again, quite wildly.

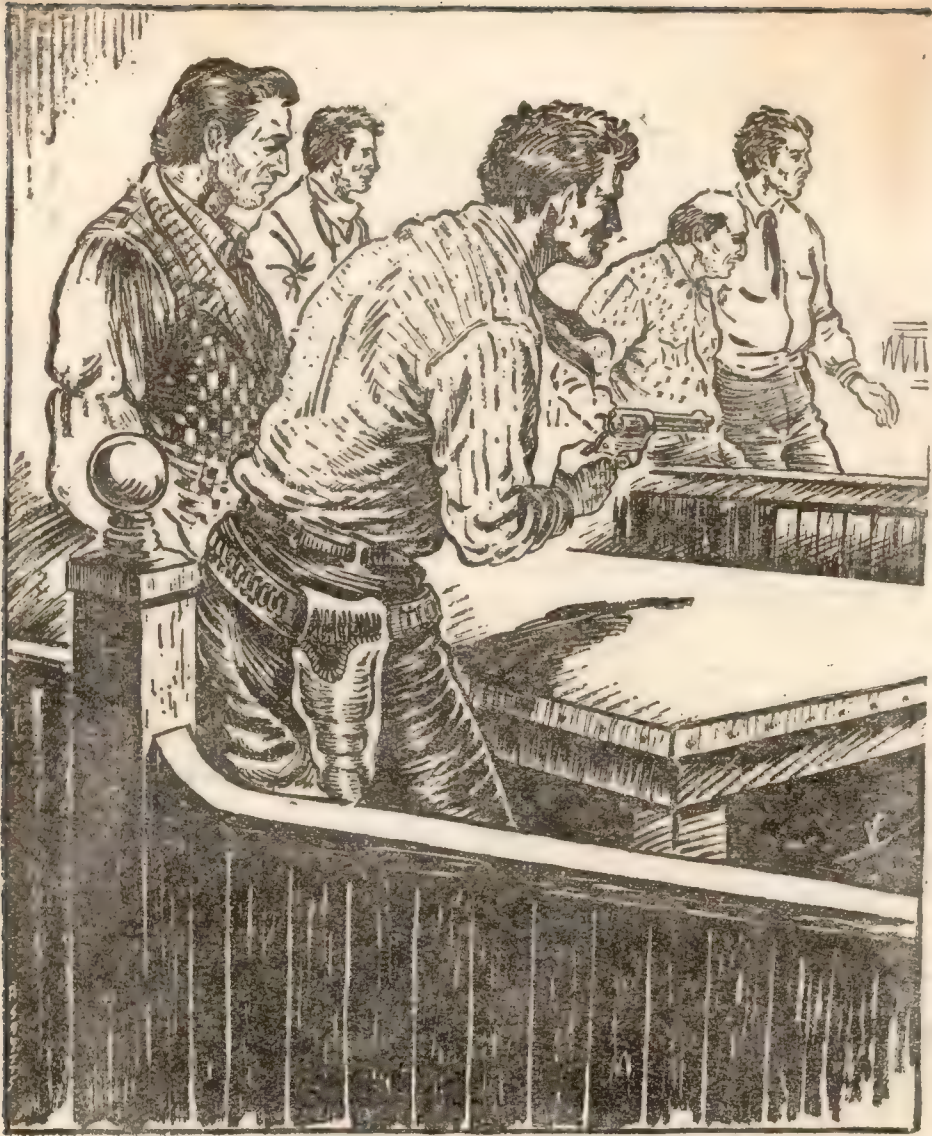
The Circle-T man now let panic take him and he fired crazily at the shuttered window from which Luther's voice had come.

Kyle pulled the trigger deliberately and saw Fitch slugged into a wheeling fall, clawing at his face; then Kyle went into a diving run into the yard to pull Martha aside as the Circle-T men began a frenzied firing.

Giles Marcus and the two Billings riders whooped joyfully under the thunder of their six-guns and O'Connell was calmly loading and firing his rifle as if he was serving drinks at his bar.

THE battle had been violent and brief, and quiet had come to Twin Bells Ranch with the sunset. Cattle moved contentedly in a lower pasture and Giles Marcus, riding the dark shift, crooned softly in the night. A lantern blinked in the bunkhouse where O'Connell and Ed

(Continued on page 92)



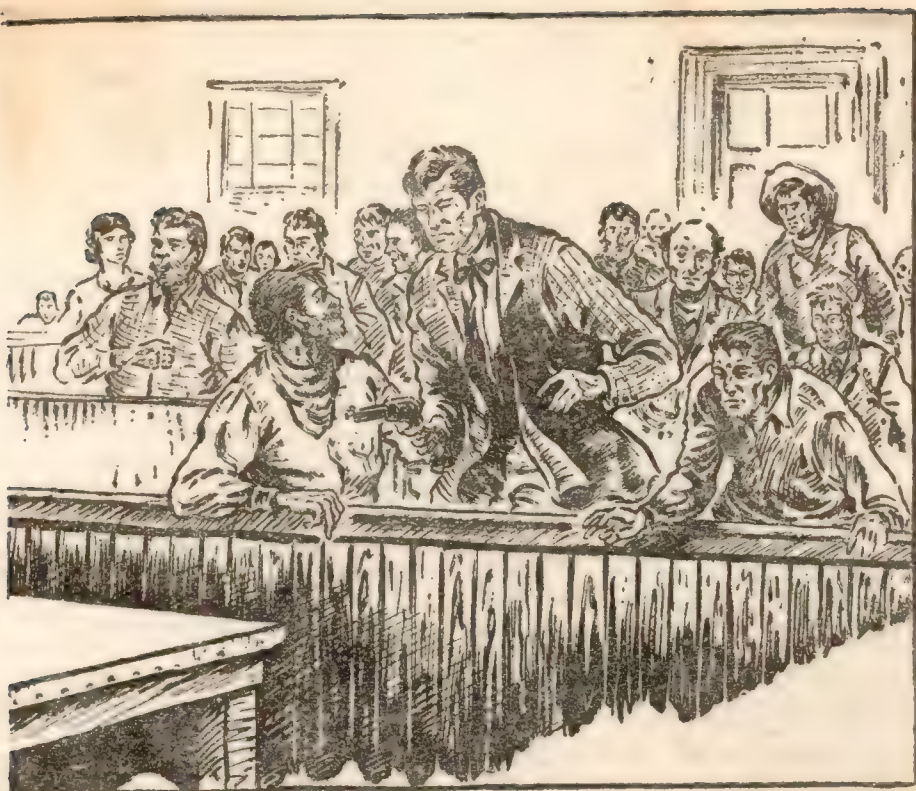
"I gambled and I lost," he said. "Sheriff, I would prefer not to hang."

THE curtain came down on the last act of the play, and there was only scanty applause from the saloon-theater audience. John Tremaine, proud of his art, was deeply hurt and accordingly refused to make the usual curtain bow. He knew at long last that as an actor, as a manager of a show troupe playing cow-towns and gold camps, he was at the end of his rope. Such places had no apprecia-

tion of dramatic art. His career, once brightly promising, had led nowhere.

Heart-weary, he let his stage personality slip from him. He no longer looked the part of the dashing Confederate Army officer of the play, *Magnolia Blossoms*. He looked what he was, a beaten man of forty-odd years.

"It's all right, John," one of his fellow actors said. "The next town may like us."



Curtain Call for a Has-Been

By JOE CHADWICK

John Tremaine looked up, saw how the other members of the Blackstone and Tremaine Players troupe stood dispiritedly about in their bedraggled costumes. Three women and three men, all faded-looking

now. Counting himself, they were seven luckless people. Seven people who moved from pillar to post, lived hand to mouth—and called it Art! John Tremaine laughed bitterly.

Show people, the world over, have a life of their own, but in the Old West their troubles were something different. And in places where law didn't go by the books, the actors might have been justified in making their own laws for their business

A girl came toward him, a girl young and blonde and pretty.

"Dad, don't take it so hard," she pleaded.

That was Jennie, his daughter, speaking from a heart as broken as his own. John Tremaine looked at her and could have wept. Her pretty face was thin, she was tired, from the hard work of acting and the lean meals that came their way. She deserved better of life, much better.

Out front of the curtain there was noisy revelry. Horny-fisted men—miners, freighters, boomers—had turned back to the sort of entertainment they preferred. They would be drinking rotgut whiskey, gambling away their paydirt, dancing with tawdry women—no longer bored by a decent drama upon the stage. Backstage, the rear door opened, and a black-coated and sombreroed man entered. The newcomer was gray of hair and mustache. He nodded and said, "Evening, folks," and held open his coat to reveal a law badge. "Sheriff Macklin."

John Tremaine knew what was coming. There was a matter of skipping a hotel bill back in Virginia City, room and board. A matter for the law.

"Sheriff, must you take this step?" said John Tremaine.

"Sorry, folks," said the lawman, "but I must attach your belongings."

THERE was a silence that lingered and grew thin, and Sheriff Macklin sadly shook his head. The rear door opened again, and another sombreroed man—a young man, this time—entered. He said, "'Evenin'," and lingered by the door, a shyness in his manner. He was a cowboy dressed in his Sunday duds—blue store suit, flat-crowned gray sombrero, half-boots fancily stitched. After one glance about, he had eyes only for blonde Jennie Tremaine.

"That's the way of it," Sheriff Macklin said. "You owe that Virginia City hotel three hundred and forty dollars." His manner was uneasy, and it was apparent that he did not fancy this chore. "I'm attaching your show rig—scenery, props and costumes—until that bill is paid."

"Sheriff," said John Tremaine, "with-

out our scenery and props, we can't put on shows. It's like taking tools away from a carpenter."

Sheriff Macklin muttered that he was sorry, and at that moment the two owners of the Palace Saloon and Opera House, as the place was called, appeared backstage. They were an oddly assorted pair; Easy Ed Walsh was a fat and jovial man with a friendly red face, while Jack Kearny was a lean swarthy man with a gambler's expressionless face. Lumbering across to John Tremaine, Easy Ed Walsh held out some yellow-backed bills.

"A flat hundred was our agreement, Tremaine," he said, broadly smiling. "But you put on a fine play tonight, and the audience liked it. Jack and I have talked it over, and we're adding a bonus of fifty dollars—in appreciation."

John Tremaine flushed as he accepted the money, knowing that the extra fifty dollars was nothing more than a charitable gesture. Easy Ed Walsh knew well that the Palace's patrons had not liked the Blackstone and Tremaine players, but the big man had a great heart. John Tremaine said, "Thanks to you, Mr. Walsh—and to you, Mr. Kearny."

Jack Kearny was puffing on a cheroot, and he merely nodded his acknowledgment. His dark eyes were quick and shrewd, and seeing the sheriff, he knew what was up. He said, "Tremaine, Easy Ed and I have talked some more. We figured that times being what they are, things tough on the road for a show troupe, some of your folks might like to stay on here in Globe City." He paused and thoughtfully studied the ash end of his cheroot. Then: "The Palace could use entertainers like the three ladies with your troupe. It would be an easier living than the road. The pay will be good."

John Tremaine stiffened and his face darkened. He was insulted but, remembering the generous bonus, he held back the angry words springing to his lips. He looked at the three woman members of the troupe, at Jennie, at Nina Warren—who was really Mrs. Len Blackstone, his partner's wife—and at Claire Benson, a pretty and buxom woman who had been his leading lady for a dozen hard years. Jennie

met his glance and shook her blonde head; Nina Warren moved close to her husband, and it was clear that Len Blackstone would not permit his wife to become a percentage girl in a saloon. Claire Benson was a hardy woman with hair bleached golden, and she said, "John, I'd rather go hungry."

And from across the stage, the Sunday-dressed cowboy said, "Kearny, you ought to know better. You ought to know ladies when you see them."

Everyone turned and stared at the speaker, and Jack Kearny growled, "Who are you, bucko? What are you doing back here?"

"My name's Andy Bent, Kearny, and I'm here to see a friend."

Jennie Tremaine moved over and stood defiantly beside the cowboy. She lifted her head high, and she said, "I asked Andy to meet me here, Mr. Kearny. We'll leave as soon as I change from my costume."

Jack Kearny said, in his flat faro-dealer's way, "It's all right, Miss Tremaine, if he's a friend of yours." He looked from Jennie to the other two women. "If you change your minds, the Palace will be glad to put you on. Ed, come along."

He moved to the wings, toward the passage that led out front, and Easy Ed Walsh said expansively, "Folks, I wish you luck," and followed.

Sheriff Macklin went away too, after a word of caution: "Don't try to move any of your gear, Tremaine. You've got to consider it impounded by my office."

John Tremaine made his way to the men's dressing-room to remove his grease paint and his costume. Len Blackstone, Gregg Simon and Matt Wade, the other male members of the troupe, went through the change into their street clothes without talking. They were as depressed as John Tremaine; like Tremaine, they realized how bad their situation really was. In this frontier world of cowtowns and mining camps, they were misfits. They knew no trade or profession other than acting, and now even that was taken from them.

They were stranded, and that for show people was as bankruptcy to a merchant. John Tremaine watched them file out, and let them go even though he wished to



"I'll see you later," he said, and was off.

speak to them. He knew talk was no good. He could offer them no encouragement, no hope or promise . . . They knew too well how far that one hundred and fifty dollars would stretch.

Finally a knock sounded at the door, and Claire Benson's pleasant voice roused him from his dark mood. "John, the others have gone. You'd better come."

He closed the battered trunk that held his grease paints and his costumes, turned from it somehow knowing that never again would he have use for it. He was leaving behind his shabby belongings, and he was sourly amused to think that Sheriff Macklin, when he auctioned off the effects of the Blackstone and Tremaine Players, would realize little in the way of cash money. Scenery, props, costumes; none was worth much.

Claire Benson took his arm as they left by the rear door and stepped out into the dark alleyway beside the Palace. The touch of her hand, the wistful smile she gave him, had a mild comforting effect upon John Tremaine. Twelve years he had known her; she had become his leading lady after the death of his wife, and now it seemed a strange miracle that she had stayed with him and the troupe. Claire was no longer a girl, but she did retain the bloom of beauty; she had had many good offers of marriage. A week before, in Virginia City, a bonanza king had offered to shower her with diamonds—to build her a fine house, to make a queen of her. And Claire had said no.

Now, moving through that dark alley-

way, Claire whispered, "Everything will turn out all right, John. We've been down on our luck before, and one day it will change for the better. We'll be rich and famous——"

"Claire, this is the end," he told her. "You had better quit the troupe. Somehow, you'll be able to make a new and better life for yourself."

"John, you must know why I can't quit."

He did not answer that, but suddenly he did know. Claire Benson was held to the troupe because of an attachment to him. She cared for him, even though he had never considered her as anything other than his leading lady. He had been so plagued by misfortune, so hard-pressed by his attempts to make ends meet, that he had had no thoughts for any woman. If there was affection in him, he had showered it upon Jennie. . . . He said curtly, "Claire, that's no good. The troupe is broken up, and you'll have to go your way."

"Yes," said Claire Benson in a whisper no louder than a sigh.

THEY reached the Liberty House, Globe City's one hotel, and the others were gathered in the lobby. Jennie and the cowboy, Andy Bent, were seated in a corner of the wide room—apart from the others. John Tremaine saw that of them all only his daughter was not vastly worried. She had youth, and so was unafraid of the hardships of life. She was smiling as she talked with Andy Bent. And John Tremaine thought: "There are stars in her eyes." Vaguely, he knew that Jennie was in love.

He faced the others, and his own despair was reflected on their faces. They were helpless, as frightened as children in a dark room, and they looked to him, to John Tremaine, for some hope. Gregg Simon was a pale middle-aged man, physically frail. Matt Wade was still young; he had two years before quit college to become an actor, making a mistake he now would never right.

Len Blackstone, standing with his arm about his wife, put the group's thoughts into words: "John, what are we to do?"

"Friends, it has come to the point," said

John Tremaine, "where any of us who can help himself or herself must do so—without thought of the others. And I wish each of you luck."

He took from his pocket the money given him by Easy Ed Walsh. He handed it to Len Blackstone, and said, "Take care of that, Len. It's to pay our hotel bill here." And he turned and walked from the Liberty House. For one of the few times in his life, he wanted to be alone.

A boomtown like Globe was busy and crowded at night, and Union Street was thronged with miners and freighters and a motley gathering of boomers. John Tremaine made his way through the milling groups of men, turned finally into a grubby saloon. He went to the bar and shoved his watch across to the bartender. It was a fine gold timepiece of English make, a souvenir from the days when he had been a matinee idol in the theaters of Eastern cities. Now he said, "Will that get me enough whiskey to get drunk on?"

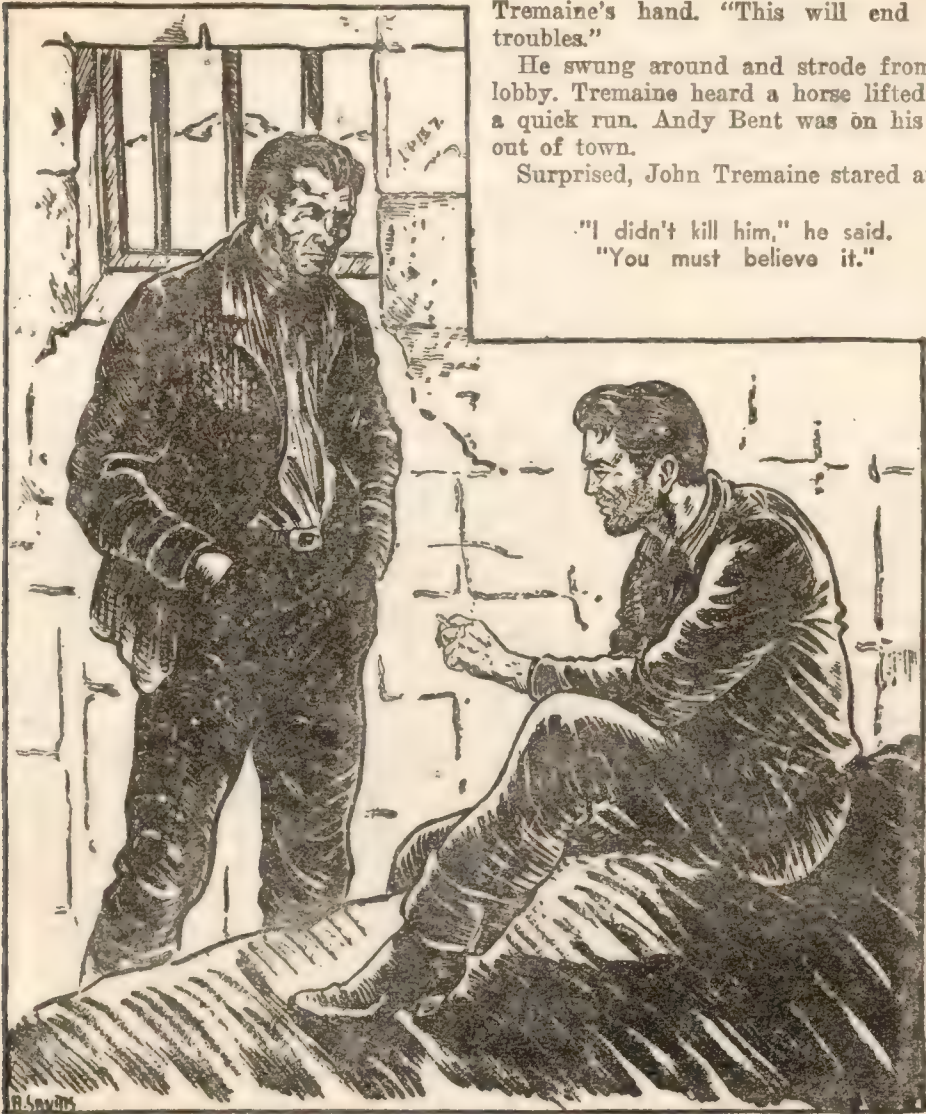
"And then some," said the bartender.

It was a foolish thing to do. He sat at the corner table and tried to drown his troubles, but the fiery green whiskey merely made him feel sick. Finally he gave up his drinking and sat there in an increasingly dark mood. He was there in that grubby saloon for nearly three hours.

Then, close to two o'clock in the morning, the bartender told him, "Closing time, friend. Come back and try it again tomorrow night."

John Tremaine roused himself and looked about. The saloon was deserted except for a couple drunks soon to be evicted. He arose and stumbled into the night, and the streets of Globe were almost deserted of people. The dives were growing dark, one by one.

John Tremaine made his way to the Liberty House, and the lobby was deserted except for the pasty-faced night clerk drowsing behind the desk. John slumped into one of the lobby chairs. In a little while, he dozed. Then he was awakened by a hurried rush of boots across the bare wooden floor. The clerk also roused himself. The man who had entered in such a hurry was Andy Bent.



Tremaine's hand. "This will end your troubles."

He swung around and strode from the lobby. Tremaine heard a horse lifted into a quick run. Andy Bent was on his way out of town.

Surprised, John Tremaine stared at the

"I didn't kill him," he said.
"You must believe it."

There was excitement in the cowboy, along with his haste. He came over to Tremaine and said, "Jennie told me how things are with you folks, Mr. Tremaine. I'm plumb sorry, and I want to help you."

He was a clean-cut young fellow, well-set up in the lean-hipped way of horse-men. Tremaine could understand why Jennie liked Andy Bent.

"Here, sir," the cowboy said, and thrust a great roll of yellow-backed bills into

money in his hand. The bills were gold certificates of large denominations, and, without counting them, he knew that there was at least two thousand dollars in the roll. He looked up and saw the hotel clerk staring. The clock over the desk pointed to three o'clock. The clerk-muttered, "That's a heap of money to come into, at three in the morning. Who is that hombre anyway?"

John Tremaine shook his head. He knew

nothing about his benefactor except that his name was Andy Bent. He had thought him a mere cowboy, one taking a holiday away from a forty-dollar-a-month riding job. He recalled now that for the past two weeks Andy Bent had been in every town where the troupe had played. He had followed Jennie, and now . . . John Tremaine shook his head again. He could understand why Andy Bent wanted to help Jennie and her people, for it was obvious that the cowboy had fallen in love with her. But he could not understand where Andy Bent had gotten so much money. . . .

LIKE show people the world over, the Blackstone and Tremaine Players were late risers. They came down to breakfast, one by one, at ten o'clock and at that late hour had the dining-room table to themselves. A buxom waitress, a Swedish immigrant girl, waited upon them. She was a flaxen-haired girl with a cheerful manner. This morning she was bursting with news.

When the last of the troupe was seated, she paused in pouring the coffee and said, "You people hear the news—the very bad news?"

She spoke with a heavy accent, and yesterday the male members of the troupe had joshed her for her awkward speech. But now, full of their own trouble, they merely stared at her. John Tremaine had not told any of them about the two thousand dollars he had received from Andy Bent. The money was in his pocket; it was in his mind, troubling him. He asked: "What is the bad news, Olga?"

"Easy Ed Walsh," the girl said. "He was killed in the night!" She paused for dramatic effect, then nodded as everyone stared at her in startled surprise. "Ya! A hold-up man with a mask shot him and robbed the Palace money. It is a bad thing—very bad!"

The show people uttered shocked exclamations. Jennie Tremaine said, "How horrible! Mr. Walsh seemed such a nice man."

John Tremaine was jolted. He reached inside his coat, fingered the roll of money—and he knew. He understood now where Andy Bent had gotten that two thousand dollars. "The fool," Tremaine thought. "The crazy young fool!"

He glanced at his daughter and saw that Jennie did not suspect that the murderer of Easy Ed Walsh was her cowboy friend. The others were excitedly talking it over; they had liked the fat saloonman, and it was difficult for them to believe that he now was dead. John Tremaine drank a cup of black coffee, then rose without touching his breakfast of bacon and flap-jacks. He said, "I am going to talk to the sheriff," and left the dining room. The others would think he was going to try to get the lawman to release the troupe's scenery and props.

Reaching the street, Tremaine saw groups of men standing about and talking about the murder. Killings and robberies were not uncommon occurrences in a mining camp, but Easy Ed Walsh had been one of Globe City's most prominent and best-liked citizens. Tremaine heard one man say, "We'll hang the sidewinder that did it—but even hanging's too good for him!"

There was another group of men outside the sheriff's office, a group made up of town loafers who were loud in their indignation. Tremaine circled this gathering and stepped into the office.

Sheriff Macklin sat in the swivel chair by his rolltop desk, talking to Jack Kearny, Easy Ed Walsh's swarthy-complexioned partner. The lawman gave Tremaine an impatient look, and said, "See me another time, friend . . . I have bigger business now than yours."

John Tremaine said, "I'll wait," and uninvited took one of the chairs lined up against the wall. Jack Kearny started to talk, and he had lost his gambler's blank look. He was excited and angry.

"You sit here doing nothing, sheriff," Kearny said, "and that killer gets away. I tell you it was that cowpoke who calls himself Andy Bent."

Sheriff Macklin nodded his gray head, tugged at his drooping mustache. "No need to go off half-cocked, Kearny," he said. "Young Bent can't get far. I just want to get things straight in my mind . . . You left the Palace at closing time, going off with one of the girls. That right?"

"That's it," Kearny said curtly. "I told you so before."

"You left Easy Ed alone in the Palace, to count the night's take and lock it up in the office safe," Macklin went on. "You came back to the Palace——"

"I was passing the Palace on my way to the hotel, where I live," said Jack Kearny. "I stopped because I saw a light inside. I figured that was queer, because Easy Ed never tarried long after closing time. The light was in the back, at the office. I went in and found him shot, dying. He told me that this Bent hombre had somehow got into the Palace—maybe through the backstage door—and had thrown down on him, demanding the money. Easy Ed jumped at him, and Bent shot him. Easy Ed died before I could fetch the doctor."

Sheriff Macklin muttered, "Well, I guess that cinches it." He rose and took down his gunbelt from a wall peg. He glanced at John Tremaine and said, "I'll see you later, friend," and strode from the office. His horse, a big sorrel, stood ground-hitched outside. He mounted and rode off, heading out of town.

Jack Kearny took out and lighted a cheroot. He muttered flatly, "He'll never get that Bent hombre," seeming unaware of John Tremaine's presence.

SHERIFF MACKLIN was gone two days . . . In the meantime, John Tremaine took a job at the warehouse of the Acme Freighting Company. It was back-breaking work, the hardest work Tremaine had ever done; he toiled all day at unloading the big freight wagons that kept rolling into Globe. He worked alongside big-muscled men who laughed at his physical weakness, at his inability to lift and carry as much as they handled. They laughed, but they made things easier for him wherever they could. With the money he earned each day, he paid the room-and-board bill for Jennie and himself. The Blackstones, Len and Nina, had left town for Virginia City, where they hoped to find better luck. Gregg Simon took a job as bartender in one of the saloons, and Matt Wade departed with an outbound freighting outfit. Claire Benson stayed on in Globe City, taking the only job she could find—as a percentage girl in Jack

Kearny's Palace. Refusing John Tremaine's offer of help, Claire said, "I've always paid my own way. I'll not do otherwise now."

Only Jennie was at a loss for what to do. She was young and active, so idleness bored her. She began to wonder about Andy Bent, and she would say, "Dad, did you see Andy around? It's strange, his not coming to see me."

Somehow, the ugly news about Andy Bent had not reached her. She did not know that he was suspected of killing Easy Ed Walsh, until Sheriff Macklin came riding back. The lawman brought Andy back in irons. As he had told Jack Kearny, the cowboy had'n't been able to make a getaway. . . .

Justice in the goldfields was a crude and hasty affair, and the murder trial was to be held the Monday following Andy Bent's arrest. Globe City had a rough board courthouse, and Judge Layman Hurd, a circuit-riding jurist, was sent for by telegraph. The town boasted but one lawyer, a pompous stout man named Samuel X. Carter, and he acted as prosecuting attorney. Carter owned a rich claim in the ore hills, and spent more time at saloon bars than at his office; but he sobered up to handle the county's case against Andy Bent. There was talk about Globe that the court would appoint someone to act as the prisoner's counsel. The whole town was gripped with excitement, and Sheriff Macklin swore in half a dozen deputies against the chance of a lynching attempt.

Jennie Tremaine was stricken. She actually fell ill, and Tremaine had to get the town doctor for her. But medicine would not help Jennie Tremaine. Claire Benson gave up her job to nurse her, and Claire told John Tremaine of her fears. "I don't know what will become of Jennie if—" She hated to say it. "—if Andy is hanged."

John Tremaine went to see Andy Bent, but Sheriff Macklin stayed close by the cell and they could not talk out. The cowboy was unshaven and haggard-looking, and under a show of bravado he was seared. "I didn't kill Easy Ed Walsh," he told Tremaine. "I swear it!"

"But you did hold him up, son?"

Andy Bent nodded jerkily. "I held him up, all right—and you know why, Mr. Tremaine. I took two thousand, but didn't touch the rest of the Palace's take. Easy Ed didn't even get much mad. He just sort of talked to me, like a man to his son—saying I was making a mistake. Hell! I couldn't kill a man like Easy Ed!"

John Tremaine had no more reason than the cowboy's word for that, yet he believed it. He said, "Andy, we're going to return that stolen money. That means we have no money to bring in a lawyer. But I'll be in court, and I'll ask the judge to appoint me your counsel. We'll do what we can."

Andy Bent nodded without much hope. He said, "Friend, how is Jennie taking this?"

"She believes you innocent, son," John Tremaine said, and turned away from the cell.

Back in the office, Sheriff Macklin said, "Tremaine, I never saw a man who seems so blamed innocent." He shook his head. "I am sure going to hate to hang that cowpoke!"

MONDAY, the courtroom was jam-packed. The jury had been selected and was sworn in. Judge Layman Hurd was on the bench, and Samuel X. Carter, not too drunk to be eloquent, opened his case against the accused man. Carter made his opening talk, and he painted a fine picture of Easy Ed Walsh—and an ugly picture of how he had been murdered in cold blood. He had the jury hanging on his words, and his whiplash voice gripped the crowd. Sheriff Macklin's deputies had no trouble keeping order . . . The prisoner sat pale and frightened, and beside him John Tremaine listened to the prosecutor's words and had no hope at all.

Carter called Jack Kearny as his first witness. Taking the stand, sworn in, Kearny told how he had found his partner dying from a gunshot wound. The swarthy saloonman said, "Easy Ed told me who shot him. He said, 'Jack, it was that cowpoke, Andy Bent.'"

Tremaine jumped to his feet, shouting, "I object! That is hearsay. The witness

has no right to repeat what someone else is supposed to have said!"

The crowd muttered with sudden excitement, and Samuel X. Carter gave Tremaine a surprised look. Judge Hurd said, "Objection sustained."

Carter bowed to Tremaine, said, "Sir, you are a better lawyer than you are an actor." Carter turned back to Kearny and began to question him. Kearny brought out nothing that was not already known; that two thousand dollars had been stolen, that Easy Ed Walsh had been unarmed when shot, and that he had found Walsh dying at three-thirty in the morning.

Finally, Carter said, "Your witness, counsel."

Tremaine surprised and disappointed the crowd by saying, "No questions." Jack Kearny left the stand, and Carter called another witness.

Doc Garrett, the second witness, merely testified that he had gone to the Palace after being roused from bed by a man sent by Jack Kearny. The time was about three forty-five, and he had found Easy Ed Walsh dead. Tremaine did not cross-examine the medico.

Carter then called Will Evans, night clerk at the Liberty House. The pasty faced clerk told how the accused man had come to the hotel the night of the murder, exactly at three o'clock, to hand the actor, John Tremaine, a large sum of money . . . There was an uproar in the courtroom then, and Judge Hurd had to pound his gavel to restore order.

Tremaine still had no questions, and Carter called other witnesses. He put two men on the stand who had seen Andy Bent hightail it out of town that night, a few minutes after three o'clock. He put Sheriff Macklin on the stand and had the lawman tell how he had arrested Andy Bent. Carter said, "Did the accused man admit holding up Easy Ed Walsh, sheriff?"

"He admitted the hold-up," Macklin said. "But he swore he did not kill—"

Carter snapped, "I did not ask that, sheriff. Answer only the questions put to you. Did Andy Bent admit holding up Easy Ed Walsh and robbing him of two thousand dollars?"

Gruffly, Macklin said, "Yes."

FINALLY Carter had finished, and with a wave of his hand gave John Tremaine permission to defend his client—if he could. Tremaine slowly arose, and it seemed to him that there was already a rope about the neck of young Andy Bent. The jurymen looked grimly determined; the crowd had less sympathy than ever for the prisoner. Jack Kearny's dark face wore a satisfied smile. John Tremaine stood before that court and knew that this was the most difficult role of his career. For it was merely an acting role; he was no clever attorney. He looked around at the hostile faces, and he saw but one person who was for him. Claire Benson had left the sick Jennie to come to the trial.

John Tremaine said, "Your honor—gentlemen of the jury, I should apologize for standing before you. I am an actor, not a lawyer. I know nothing of the law, little of courtroom procedure—" He lifted his voice so that it rang in the room. "—But I do know that Andy Bent is innocent of the murder of Easy Ed Walsh!"

Once again, Judge Hurd had to rap for order.

"Andy Bent did give me two thousand dollars," Tremaine went on. He took the roll of bills and flung it onto a table. "It is money he took—stole, if you like—from Easy Ed Walsh. He stole it and gave it to me out of pity. He knew that I and my show troupe were destitute. Would a man so charitable kill?"

There was a heavy quiet in the courtroom, and Samuel X. Carter stared at John Tremaine with reluctant admiration.

"I have no handpicked witnesses," Tremaine went on. "I have no man to stand up and swear that Andy Bent did not kill Easy Ed Walsh." He faced the crowd. "Friends, you are honest men. There must be some among you who heard the blast of the shot that killed Easy Ed Walsh. Will you stand and speak out?"

Slowly, hesitantly, three men rose. A miner, a freighter, and a bartender. Tremaine put each man on the witness stand, had them sworn in, and he asked each the same question: "What time did you hear the shot in the Palace Saloon?"

Each man answered the same: "After

three o'clock—maybe half past three." They were certain of it, and the prosecuting attorney, quick to try to shake them, could not change their testimony.

John Tremaine now turned to the jury. "Gentlemen, the shot that killed Easy Ed Walsh was fired at three-thirty. At three o'clock, Andy Bent had already given me his stolen money and headed out of town—as shown by the county's witnesses."

Carter objected, but Judge Hurd overruled him.

"Another man killed Easy Ed Walsh," Tremaine went on. "A man who returned to the Palace at three-thirty and heard from Easy Ed that he had been held up and robbed by a cowboy, Andy Bent. This man wanted Easy Ed out of the way for some reason, and he quickly saw his chance to kill him and shift the blame onto another man. This man drew a gun and he shot Easy Ed Walsh dead, then he sent for the doctor and the sheriff and told his damning lie." More actor than he ever had been before, John Tremaine swung about and pointed an accusing finger at Jack Kearny. "Kearny, *you* murdered Easy Ed Walsh so that you could own the whole Palace!"

There was a hush in the courtroom, for men were stunned. Samuel X. Carter was staring at John Tremaine with that bright look of admiration in his eyes. Jack Kearny slowly stood up. He made no denial. A thin, mirthless smile touched his swarthy face.

"I gambled and I lost," he said. "Sheriff, I would prefer not to hang."

He reached inside his coat, and what he planned to do with the derringer, he drew no man ever knew. Sheriff Macklin saw that pocket gun, and he drew his six-gun and shot Jack Kearny through the heart—so that he would never hang.

JOHN TREMAINE took Andy Bent by the arm and led him from the courthouse through the wildly excited crowd. The cowboy seemed dazed, seemed unable to believe that he was free. There was a stain of guilt on Andy Bent, a thing he would need to live down; for it had been

(Continued on page 92)

THE DEAD ARE



By JAMES P. OLSEN

MILLIONAIRES



When he popped up from behind the headstone to take another shot at me, I was very close to him.

A PRIVATE DICK and trouble-shooter who follow oil booms, I've had to cut some crazy capers in my day. But the time I had it out with the ghost, outside a crypt in a graveyard where the dead were potential millionaires—Brother, that tops them all!

The go-round began when Ed Neal, head of Atex Oil Company's land department, wired that he had a job for me in Payup and would explain when I got there. So, heading for that boom

As trouble-shooter for that oil company, Hard Guy Duane was up against some very shrewd—and straight-shooting—ghosts who were even more dangerous than greedy! . . .

town, I didn't know what the game was, nor that ghosts and a gal were sitting in.

The gal was in Neal's office when I arrived. A small package of red-headed lusciousness, she eyed me speculatively as Neal said, "Lita Lang, meet Dallas Duane—known as Hard Guy. Hard Guy, Lita's an oil-royalty and lease expert, now doing special work for Atex."

Showing me a dimple, Lita Lang said, "I'm glad to meet you, Hard Guy, and I'm rooting for you to knock the ghost for a loop."

"Knock a—Hey!" I squawked. "What kind of a deal is this?"

"A tough one," Neal replied. "That's why I sent for you. You see, Atex is trying to lease a church property and cemetery in the Red Creek area. Big wells have come in all around it, and we think the biggest oil pool in this field lies beneath it. We offered the church and owners of cemetery lots a wad of cash and another piece of land, and we'd move the graves there before we began operations, of course. Those payments, added to royalty we'd eventually pay on oil produced, would total about a million dollars!"

"And they turned it down?" I gasped. "What the hell?"

"Church leaders, who're acting as trustees of the property, had about agreed to lease when one of them, Ab Gurn, balked. Gurn said he disliked the man I had handling things then, and wouldn't trust the company hiring him. Then, when Gurn had been voted down, up blatted an old goat, Eph Cady. He's got his crypt ready in the cemetery and swears he won't take his final snooze anywhere else."

"And when did the ghost horn in?" I asked.

"When it seemed that Cady would be overruled, too," Neal snapped. "Then, wails sounded in the cemetery at night, and church members swore they'd seen weird lights glowing on the gravestones. A superstitious lot, they took it as a sign that the dead didn't want to be moved, and changed their minds about leasing. Two of the trustees, who scoffed at that, tried to bring the rest back around. They were waylaid by a large, masked man, blackjacked and warned to cease their efforts in Atex's behalf. The man I had working on the deal was also waylaid,

roughed up and slapped silly and told to get out. He did—which was for the best. I learned he'd promised bribes to some who were undecided about the lease—stuff like that. And his quitting left me free to accept Lita's offer to try her hand at it."

"But I've failed," Lita sighed. "So you'll have to expose the ghost, Hard Guy, before the scared folks will agree to the lease and I can collect the big bonus Neal's offered me if the deal's closed."

"Why not have their parson tell them there ain't no such animals as ghosts?" I suggested.

"They don't hire a regular minister," Neal said.

"You think another oil company's back of it?" I asked.

"No," Neal declared. "Our offer was far above any of the other companies, so it would do them no good. I'd say that Eph Cady or Ab Gurn, or both, were behind it all—the stubborn old devils!"

"Any ideas about the graveyard hocus-pocus?" I went on.

"Your pal, Specs Norton, has poked around and written reams about the Red Creek spook. He might help you on that," Neal said.

"I asked Specs about it," Lita put in. "He said he might help clear up the scare if I'd—Well, right away I caught so many passes, I felt like an all-American end!"

SO that four-eyed newspaper correspondent, Specs Norton, was in Payup and on the make as usual. Having been in dozens of booms with that lanky moocher, I'd question any help I got from him!

"Well," I said, "I'll look around and see what I can do."

"And do it fast!" Neal slapped his desk. "I'm due back at the main office, where a meeting of big stockholders has been called to urge their approval of an expansion program for Atex. If we get the Red Creek lease, it'll help influence their decision favorably."

"Quick stuff, and rough stuff!" I hopefully suggested.

"Anything but murder," Neal agreed, adding, "the car outside is for you to use. Take Lita along to show you through the field."

"I'll have to change clothes before we go," Lita said as we went out and got

into the car. "It'll take me about half an hour."

"Make it an hour," I told her as I parked and let her out at the Payup Hotel. "I want to see if Specs Norton is anywhere around."

Specs was. I found him in a bootlegger's, staring sadly at an empty glass. Seeing me, his eyes brightened behind his horn-rimmed specs and he cried, "Welcome to Payup. We'll have a drink—on you."

Paying the corn-pusher for two drinks, I scowled at Specs and growled, "Well, I took Neal's ghost-chasing job—you louse."

"Louse?" Specs took a drink, gagged, then blinked at me.

"Only a louse," I said, "would tell a defenseless frail like Lita that he'd help shoo a ghost, and then make passes at her."

"She's about as defenseless as a combination skunk, armadillo and porcupine," Specs muttered. "Selling leases and stuff to the less-deadly sex, she'll play Sweet Willy until she sells a bill of goods, then give him Billy Hell. You go for her, and you'll learn!"

"I got her diagnosed, and know what to prescribe," I said.

"Hah!" Specs hooted nastily.

"You'll see," I said. "But first, I've got to grab a ghost. So give, jughead. Tell me about the lights, and stuff like that."

"The lights on the tombstones in the cemetery were seen only on damp nights. Investigating carefully, I found phosphorous had been smeared on some of them. When wet, it glowed. Simple, huh?"

"Yeah. But why didn't you tell Ed Neal that?" I demanded.

"Because revealing the trick would've spoiled my ghost yarn and done no good. Don't forget that, besides the ghost scare, two church trustees were sapped and Neal's lease-hound slapped around."

"Who you got pegged for that?" I asked.

"I think Ab Gurn did that, and Eph Cady played ghost. Now, if I can prove that, I'll write Cady up plenty," Specs angrily avowed. "The old goat! I went to see him yesterday, to get a story about a gun-battle in the cemetery twelve years ago. He said he'd hired a lawyer, Lint Gootch, to do his talking, and chased me off his ranch."

"Yeah? And have you talked to Gootch yet?" I wondered.



I scowled at Specs and growled: "Well, I took Neal's ghost-chasing job, you louse."

"No. He's a big cuss and don't like me because of something I wrote about a crook he was defending recently. Besides, I knew you were due here, and figured we could talk to him together. Savvy?"

"Sure. Bravo." I sniffed. "Lead me to the gent."

WE killed our drinks, then, and Specs led the way along the main drag and up to Lint Gootch's office. A blue-jowled big cuss, the lawyer got out of his chair, glanced at me and then glared at Specs and rumbled, "Didn't I tell you to keep away from me?"

"Before you get gay," Specs big-chestedly advised, "let me introduce Hard Guy, the new ghost-buster for Atex Oil."

"So?" Gootch eyed me narrowly. "What do you want with me?"

"Nothing—yet," I shrugged. "I just came along with Specs."

"And I want to know why Eph Cady hired you, and why he got so tough when I asked him a few simple questions," Specs told Gootch.

"Cady retained me because he's sick of being pestered by you and other snoopers, and to protect his rights if other churchmen try to lease the cemetery and move his crypt," Gootch snapped. "He got tough because you've spread too much ghost bunk, and I advised it."

"I didn't intend to ask him about spooks, but about the time Tex Sargo was captured in the cemetery," Specs said, adding, "and wasn't Wade, your senior partner who died, Sargo's lawyer then?"

Strangely upset, Gootch snarled, "So what? Anyhow, Sargo's time is up, so keep your damned printer's ink off of him, too."

"Why?" Specs probed. "Is that outlaw a friend of yours?"

"All I know about him is what I've heard. What I mean is, lay off writing anything that mentions that cemetery," Gootch ammended.

Turning to me, then, he said, "News stories cause the curious to pry around the cemetery and Cady's crypt, and it riles him. But if Norton'll let up, I might persuade Cady to okay that lease."

"Gootch, you and Cady are in cahoots to collect side money from Atex," I accused him. "That's why you don't want publicity."

"No," he denied. "And I'll prove it. Let things ride and I'll bring Cady to law and charge only a reasonable fee for my efforts."

"Let things ride? A reasonable fee?" I hooted. "Hell, do you think that Atex or I will stand still for that kind of a dig?"

"You'll do what I say, or I'll really tie that lease up, and sock Atex a big bundle before I'll untie it!" Gootch threatened.

"Start socking, then!" I snarled, and slapped him hard.

Swearing, Gootch grabbed for an inkwell on his desk. I drove a right to his jaw, spun him around and dropped him to his knees. Springing up, he kicked at me, then bent over when I pounded one into his belly. Gasping, Gootch lunged toward his desk, opened the top drawer and glommed onto a heavy blackjack. I really sloughed him a doozy then, and as he went tail-over appetite into a corner he dropped the sap. Kicking it aside, I looked around at Specs.

"So Gootch uses a blackjack," Specs commented. "And those church trustees were sapped by a big lug who wore a mask."

Getting up, Gootch croaked, "You can't hang that on me."

"I can this, though," I grunted as I stepped in and hung a right on his jaw that skinned my knuckles and knocked him out.

"Viva!" Specs cheered. "This calls for a drink—on you."

"No," I said as we departed, leaving Gootch cold. "I'm going out to the field and pay my disrespects to Eph Cady and Ab Gurn."

LEAVING Specs, I went back to the car, and my eyes went *click* when I saw Lita standing beside it. She'd put on fancy cowboy boots and tied a ribbon around her hair, and in between was a well-filled sweater and riding pants that fit her neatly indeed.

Having trouble keeping my gaze indifferent and my voice cool, I said, "I'm sorry I'm late, but I ran into some business that held me up."

By the way she got into the car, I could tell that Lita was mad because I showed no interest in her get-up. Seeing my skinned knuckles, then, she curtly said, "It must've been rough business."

"It was rough on Lint Gootch," I agreed, and told her what had happened, as I drove out of Payup toward the oil-field.

When I'd finished, Lita moved over against me and said, "So you've already discovered that Cady's in cahoots with that shyster, Gootch. Oh, Hard Guy, you work so fast I'm almost afraid of you!"

"No need to be," I said, keeping both hands on the wheel.

"No, I guess not," she snapped, and moved away from me.

With Lita giving me peevish, puzzled sidewise glances, we rode on into a field of derricks that marked the Red Creek pool, and came to the graveyard where the dead held down a million bucks.

It was a desolate place inside of a sagging barbed-wire fence. The sandy ground was covered with shame vine and sandburrs, the old headstones and rotting wooden markers were gummy with oil sprayed from surrounding wells, and the church was a frame eyesore with a woodpecker-eaten steeple. In that setting, Eph Cady's crypt—an atrocity adorned with marble statues of pot-bellied cherubim and sad-sack angels—stood out like a red nose at a temperance meeting.

"The guy who built that must be a character," I chuckled.

"Wait'll you meet the old curmudgeon," she advised.

"No use waiting," I said. "Let's get it over with."

Following Lita's directions, I drove on through the field and along oil-scummed Red Creek until we came to a ramshackle house in a clump of cottonwoods. There, Eph Cady, a scrawny buzzard with billy-

goat whiskers, was sprawled in a chair on his front porch.

A hostile expression on his pan, Cady stood up when Lita and I got out of the car. Backing toward his doorway, then, he squalled at Lita, "Git off my place, yuh Jezebel! Won't do yuh no good to try sugar-talkin' me around like yuh done Ab Gurn—so git!"

"You're crazy!" Lita snapped. "Besides, I came here only because Hard Guy, here, who works for Atex, wants to talk to you."

"You can talk to my lawyer; his name's Gootch," Cady spat at me.

"I'll talk to *you*," I told him stepping up onto the porch.

Swearing, Cady reached inside his house, and I nailed him as he grabbed a shotgun he had handy just around the door. Wrenching it away from him, I threw it across the yard, gripped the back of his neck and barked, "You old weasel, if you want to stay out of your crypt, you'd better confess that you played those ghost tricks and tell me what kind of a deal you made with Gootch."

"I'll have yuh indicted for this, damn yuh!" Cady squealed, and tried to kick me.

STILL holding him by the neck, I sat down on the edge of the porch, gripped his legs between my knees and bent him over. Then, raising my voice above his irate squalls, I told Lita to hand me a piece of board that was lying in the littered yard.

Whap! Dust flew out of the seat of Cady's pants and a wail of pain out of his mouth. Whamming him again, I snarled, "That's how you sounded in the graveyard, too, ain't it?"

"Yeah!" Cady screeched. "But I was jest scarin' them as was meanin' to lease it an' move my musseleeum ag'in my say-so."

"And you're in with Gootch to gouge Atex," I prompted him.

"That's a lie—owwooo!" he sirened as I fed him more board.

"Talk fast and talk straight," I warned him.

"Gootch come to me an' said if I'd object to Atex leasin' the graveyard an' movin' my musseleeum, he'd git me a thousan' dollars more'n they'd offered me, an' only charge me a hunnert for gittin' it!" Cady

cried. "He told me to play ghost when the others aimed to lease it anyhow. But I ain't busted no law, an' ain't ghosted none since Gootch told me to stop on account of it was causin' folks to spy around the graveyard of nights."

"Ain't busted no law, huh?" I busted him another one on the seat. "How about Gootch, blackjacking the church trustees who had gumption enough not to be scared by your graveyard gamboling?"

"I swear I don't know ary 'bout that!" Cady bawled.

"I guess you don't," I conceded, letting him go. "Anyhow, the important thing is that you're going to tell those folks you scared the truth—so they'll lease the land to Atex, as they first intended."

Rubbing his stern, Cady whimpered, "I dassent tell 'em. Why, they'd be so mad, they'd oystersize me, they would."

"Fellow," I warned him in parting, "being ostracized by your neighbors for a while will be easier than having me beat your tail to tatters. Remember that when I call on you to speak your piece."

"Oh, Hard Guy," Lita rejoiced as we drove away. "Now all we have to do is explain to the others, and the lease is in the bag."

"Not quite all," I disagreed. "I haven't seen Ab Gurn yet."

"But there's no need for you to," she assured me. "You see, I've about got him into the notion of going along with the others."

"Why didn't you tell Neal and me that before?" I demanded.

"Because I thought it best to let Gurn alone till our other difficulties were settled and we were all set to wind things op."

"Yeah? Well, I'm going to talk to him anyhow," I persisted.

"Very well!" Peevishly. "But, please don't antagonize him."

ANTAGONIZE Gurn? When we got to his place, up the creek from Cady's, and Gurn appeared, I promptly decided against waging war. A six-footer with gorilla-like arms and hands, Gurn reeked strength as he came out to the car and drawled, "Howyuh today, Miss Lang?"

"Fine," Lita said, and then, after introducing me, told him my business and

how I'd made Cady confess his haunting hijinks.

"Thet's shore fine, 'cause ol' Eph's own-in' up will rid the way so thet-there lease deal can be got through," Gurn applauded.

"For a jasper who was against it in the beginning, you seem mighty pleased," I observed. "How come you to change your mind?"

"Wal, I like Miss Lang, but I never liked Biggs, the feller afore her, 'cause he was a dirty liar," Gurn explained.

"What'd he lie to you about?" I prodded Gurn.

"Wal, Atex wanted land to give for a new graveyard an' church, an' Biggs allowed they'd buy it from me at a good figger if I'd be in favor of the lease. Then they ups an' buys it from another man."

"So you got sore and bucked Atex because you failed to get yourself an extra spoonful of the gravy, you chiseler!" I barked.

"Don'tcha call me names," Gurn rumbled.

"What'll you do if I do?" I demanded.

"Why, I'll drag you bodaciously outta the car, shake you till your teeth rattle an' then slap them names back down your throat."

"Like you did the lease-hound named Biggs?" I fired back at Gurn.

"Oh, you know Lint Gootch did that," Lita protested.

"Know he didn't," I grunted. "Gootch would've sapped Biggs, but Biggs was shaken and slapped, like Gurn just threatened me."

"I dunno what you're talkin' about," Gurn surlily denied.

"Maybe"—I kicked the starter and put the car in gear—"I'll make myself better understood if I have to look you up again."

On the way back to Payup, Lita eyed me worriedly for a bit, then asked, "Can you tell me why Gurn would've roughed up Biggs?"

"Yeah," I nodded. "But I don't think you'd like the answer!"

That held her until we reached town and I parked near the hotel. There, when I told her good night and started off through the deepening dusk, she called, "Wait, Hard Guy. We have to plan about seeing the church members tomorrow, so why not

do it while we have dinner in the hotel coffee shop? I can be ready within an hour."

"Oh, all right," I agreed, showing no enthusiasm.

Chuckling, because pretending that I didn't go for Lita was making her have at me, I went on over to the bootleg bazaar, where I found Specs holding down a table. To save him mooching me, I got a bottle of urp syrup at the bar before I sat down with him.

"How'd you get along?" Specs grabbed the bottle.

I gave him the dope on Eph Cady but, for reasons of my own, skipped mention of my visit with Ab Gurn, and wound up saying, "But there's nothing to print until the whole thing's settled—savvy?"

Nodding, Specs said, "Don't need that now, anyhow. You see, I didn't waste my time while you were in the field. I ran down the yarn on the outlaw, Tex Sargo and made a long-distance call to a paper in the State Capital. I learned that Gootch was right when he said Sargo's time was up. Sargo was released from the pen four days ago. That gives me a live news tieup to head up a feature spread."

"I don't get it," I said. "What's news about Sargo and that old battle in the cemetery—except that you want to use the yarn to mention the cemetery and rub Gootch's fur the wrong way some more?"

"Sargo was quite a lad," Specs told me. "He headed a bunch of outlaws who holed up along Red Creek in the old days. His last job, Sargo tried to make the Daltons and Coffeyville look like tinhorn stuff. About a hundred miles south of here, the gang robbed a train and knocked over two banks. The loot aggregated about sixty-thousand seeds. Two posses got on their tail, and in a running fight back to Red Creek, all but one of Sargo's gang, and except Sargo himself, were killed. Sargo and that other outlaw were cornered and made a stand in Red Creek cemetery. Sargo was wounded and captured, and the guy with him was killed."

"How about the dough the gang'd grabbed?" I idly wondered.

"Sargo claimed the packhorse carrying it, being overloaded, drowned while they were crossing Red Creek, which was swol-



"Sorry I'm late," I told Lita, "but I ran into some business that held me up."

len with Spring rains at the time. His story must've been true, because he'd been pressed too closely to've stopped and buried it along the way. The fact the dough was lost, and Sargo hadn't killed anybody, was in his favor. Wade, the attorney who later took Gootch into his office, and who is now dead, got Sargo off with eighteen years. Sargo was a model prisoner, got six years off good time, and he's back on the bricks after serving twelve years."

SITTING there, I watched Specs pour himself another drink, while ideas clanged around inside my skull like a wrench tossed into a flywheel rebounding and clanging around inside an engine-house.

When Specs had gagged down his shot, I said, "Did it strike you as funny that Gootch would have Cady play ghost, offering to get him an extra grand out of the lease deal and charge Cady only a

hundred bucks?"

"Sounded darned odd—for Lint Gootch," Specs admitted.

"Then, when the ghost act held up the lease, but got a curious bunch flocking out to the cemetery, Gootch does an about-face and wants the whole business shushed and forgotten. You savvy that?"

"He was afraid he'd be linked up with it?" Specs guessed.

"That," I stated, "is only a small part of the right answer."

"Then what's the whole of it, Hard Guy?"

I might've had the wrong idea. So I wasn't going to tell Specs what it was, and give him a chance to hooraw me if I was wrong. So I said: "If you want to make a little trip with me, maybe we can get the whole answer tonight. Or maybe tomorrow night or the next."

"Sure," Specs agreed. "Where we tripping to?"

"Red Creek graveyard," I told him.

"Aw, hell," he griped. "What's the use lousing around out there, now that you've made Eph Cady confess he was the ghost?"

"I'm not saying," I answered. "And of course, if you don't want to be in on the derrick floor when the well comes in, you can stay here in town."

"Dammit," Specs growled, "when do we start?"

"Soon as we've had dinner with Lita Lang," I said.

"We?" Specs regarded me suspiciously. "Since when did you get so big-hearted you declared me in on your dates? Could be the Lang dame is giving you a cold shoulder and you need a bodyguard?"

"I'll not get frozen out by her," I confidently declared.

"No—only badly frost-bitten!" Specs hooted as we left the D.T.'s den and went over to the hotel, where Lita was waiting in the crowded lobby. She'd dolled herself up in a tight-fitting knitted suit, and was an eye-fall as she came toward me, a smile on her face. But the moment she saw Specs with me, her mouth twisted angrily and her eyes blazed like flaming yellow-dogs. I'd hoped that my running in a third party would get her goat, and I wasn't disappointed.

"Good evening—Damnon and Pythias," she greeted us coldly.

Specs bowed exaggeratedly. I grinned and said, "We'll have to rush through the feed bag. Specs and I have to go to the field tonight, to see . . . er, to see a man."

"What man?" Lita eyed me worriedly as I took her arm, guided her into the coffee shop and to a table.

"Oh, just a man," I evaded, winking openly at Specs.

That got La Lang more than ever and, throughout the grab-and-gobble meal, she kept asking leading questions, which I avoided.

AS we rose from the table, then, a pair of drunks careened into the coffee shop, and Specs was reminded of an oversight on his part. He corrected it, saying, "Hard Guy, I forgot to bring a dose of chili-chaser. I'll go get some and meet you in the lobby."

When he'd rammed away, Lita turned to me and said, "Since you don't seem to care to be alone with me, I'll leave you now," and headed toward the stairs.

Stopping to buy a package of smokes at the cigar counter, I left the noisy, jammed lobby and went outside, standing in the doorway while I waited for Specs to get back. My car was still parked a couple of doors down the drag, where I'd left it when I'd brought Lita in from the field. Glancing that way, I suddenly started toward it, then caught myself and stepped back. Maybe I'd only imagined I'd seen the rear door open and close?

I stepped out when I saw Specs coming, his coat pockets sagging with the weight of bottles. We got into the car and headed for the field. Bounced toward it, might be a better word for it. The road was full of chuckholes and bumps and I did my royal best not to miss a one of them. Specs, squawking, bumped his head on the top of the car time after time, and all I did was grip the wheel tighter, hang on, step up the speed and hit more bumps. The payoff came when I banged over an unburied oil line, the back of the car bounded several feet off the ground and came down with a tooth-busting crash. There sounded a cry of pain in the back of the car, and I immediately pulled over to the side of the road and stopped.

"Maybe," I jeered, looking over into the back, "if you'd sit up on the seat and not

try riding down there on the floor, you'd be more comfortable, Miss Lang."

"Oh, damn you," Lita sobbed, rubbing her knees and other bruised and pounded parts of her lovely anatomy as she sat up on the back seat. "You knew I was back here, and that's why you went out of your way to hit all those bumps—you beastly jackass!"

Uncorking a bottle, Specs drank, then looked at me quizzically.

"Miss Lang stole a ride because she's afraid we're going out to talk to a friend of hers while she's not on hand," I answered his unspoken question as I started the car again. "Maybe I'll tell you all about it later."

Specs sighed and shook his head. Lita remained silent.

A quarter of a mile from the Red Creek cemetery, then, I drove the car up beside an enginehouse, cut the motor and got out. Specs followed suit, and I told Lita, "You had the wrong angle. I didn't come out here to have another go at Ab Gurn. Specs and I are just going to sit up with the dead millionaires in the graveyard."

"But, why?" Lita sounded petulant.

"That's what I'd like to know," Specs griped.

"I hope you'll find out tonight," I said. "Come on, Specs."

"Wait for me." Lita started to get out of the car.

"You'll wait right here," I snapped at her, and walked away.

SPECS and I went on to the graveyard. There was no moon, and the tilted gravestones looked eerie in the starlight. Whispering to Specs to post himself beside a stone near Cady's crypt, I chose one close by and we crawled under the fence and settled down. Around us, dull clicks and rattles sounded as flowing wells strained pipe and connections; in the distance, a Superior gas engine thumped and a Bessemer barked sharply. Then, after we'd been there about an hour, I heard a horse snort, a bridle chain jingle and saddle-leather creak.

Looking around, I saw the dark forms of a horse and rider and a led horse as the rider pulled up at the fence. Dismounting silently, the man tied his nags to a fencepost, took a shovel off his saddle

and climbed through the wire. Passing to the right of me, he stopped, struck a match and cupped it in one hand and read the inscription on a headstone. Going on a ways, he repeated that performance, and I heard him grunt when he located the grave he was hunting. Then, without hesitating, he began digging into that grave!

For about twenty minutes, the shadowy figure made the sand fly, and when he was down about three feet—judging by the shortening of his silhouette—I heard the shovel strike metal and the guy gave an exclamation of satisfaction. As he leaned over to examine whatever it was he'd struck, I looked around. I was just in time to see a dark figure come out of Cady's crypt and ease toward the grave!

As the man from the crypt crept forward, that odd extra sense, acquired by men long hunted or penned-up under guard, seemed to warn the man in the grave. Hunkering down in the hole, his right arm moved and I knew he was pulling a gun. Then, when the other man was within fifteen feet of him, he snarled, "A'right, you! Stay hitched an' claw some clouds!"

"Hold it, Sargo, it's me." I recognized Lint Gootch's voice.

"You, eh, shyster?" the outlaw, Tex Sargo, rasped. "An' what the hell you doin' here, sneakin' up on me?"

"What're you doing here, digging up that sixty grand that was supposed to've been lost in Red Creek?" Gootch countered, moving a few steps nearer Sargo, but still holding his hands shoulder-high. "You were supposed to see me, first thing you got out of stir."

"Figgered I'd better get the dough outa here first, Gootch."

"Don't hand me that," Gootch snapped. "You figured to dig up the money and hightail, beating me out of my twenty-grand cut."

Gootch moved nearer Tex Sargo as he spoke. Sargo, still crouched in the hole, had his head about level with Gootch's shins. So, when Gootch suddenly kicked the pile of sand Sargo had shoveled out of the grave, Sargo got it squarely in the eyes. Instinctively, Sargo threw up his left arm. He fired one shot just as Gootch kicked again and caught Sargo on the point of the jaw. The slug went wild, and

before Sargo, blinded and stunned, could fire again, Gootch was on top of him. I saw Gootch's right arm rise, caught the quick gleam of a knife, heard the chucking sound as that blade drove into Sargo's back. Gootch's arm came up, drove downward again, and a choked, involuntary cry sounded from behind a headstone on the opposite side of the grave from where I was.

"Lita—dammit!" I swore to myself, and sprang to my feet, my Police Positive in my paw, just as Gootch whirled, leaped toward Lita and grabbed her as she started running. Screaming, she jerked loose from him, whirled halfway around, tripped and sat down hard, and another scream was wrenched out of her. At the same time, I hooked my toe on a wooden grave marker and grunted plenty loud as I sprawled on my belly. Prancing around, Gootch swore and came at me with his knife. Rocking to my knees, I lined down on the son and he dived headlong behind a nearby headstone.

Gootch was packing a gun. I guess he'd used the knife on Tex Sargo because he'd feared gunshots might be heard by night workers on nearby wells and cause them to investigate. Now Gootch popped up behind that headstone, his gun winked fire and the slug tugged at my coatsleeve. My .38 barked and I heard the *splat!* of the bullet on the stone as Gootch ducked back behind it.

PLAYING hide-and-go-seek in this stiff's stomping-ground wasn't to my liking. I came to my feet, crouched, and ran toward the headstone protecting Gootch. When he popped up to take another shot at me, I was almost on top of him, and I let him have the works. My first slug caught him in the shoulder and straightened him up on his feet. My next shot, a hasty examination later proved, slammed through his lower bridgework, ripped his tongue and broke his neck!

Sick at my stomach as I stood looking down at Gootch's body, I suddenly became aware that I was being paged. Specs was stumbling toward me, croaking my name—and Lita, crawling to her feet, ran to me, grabbed me around the neck and sobbed, "Ohhh, Hard Guy!"

"Lay off." I pushed her away. "What

the hell business did you have, sneaking into this deal, anyhow?"

"I . . . well, I just wanted to know what was going on," she whimpered.

Specs had gone over to investigate Sargo, who was slumped down in the hole he'd dug in the grave. Now he squawked, "Hard Guy, this bird's not dead yet."

No, Sargo wasn't dead, but he soon would be. I could tell that by the blood that formed bubbles on his lips after I'd pulled him out of the hole and stretched him out on his back. Kneeling beside him, I wiped his lips and gave him a slug out of the bottle Specs thoughtfully handed me.

"Thanks," Sargo gurgled. "I reckon you're a John Law, but I'll thank you double if you got that crummy shyster."

"I'm a private dick," I said, "and I got Gootch all the way. So, since he can't talk, suppose you tell me how you got in with him?"

"My time was about up, when I read in a paper about an oil company aimin' to lease this graveyard for oil drillin' an' move all the graves," Sargo burred. "It nigh drove me loco, thinkin' that the *dinero* me an' the last of my men planted here, instead of losin' it in the crick, like I said, would be found when these graves was dug up. So I wrote a letter to ol' Wade, my lawyer, askin' him to come see me, an' that it'd mean a wad of cash for him. I didn't know Wade was dead, y'see. Anyhow, a guy who was bein' released sneaked the letter out an' mailed it. Gootch got it when it hit his office, an' he showed up down at the bighouse mighty pronto."

Sargo paused. After I'd wiped his lips again and given him another drink, he went on: "I offered Gootch twenty thous-an' bucks if he'd some way hold that oil company off from movin' this graveyard until I got out. I wouldn't tell him why, but I reckon he put two an' two together an' guessed my reason. I never aimed to pay the son, an' figgered I'd put one past him. Reckon I underestimated him."

"And that's why Gootch worked on Cady, and why he wanted you to forget the ghost business, Specs," I muttered. "After the lease was stalled, Gootch didn't want people prowling around here at night. He figured that Sargo would try to cross him and dig up the dough like he did,

and wanted a clear crack at killing Sargo and taking all that buried money for himself."

"But howinell did you figure it out and decide to come out here tonight?" Specs mumbled.

"It figured itself when you told me Sargo's story," I pointed out, and then held the bottle to Sargo's lips again. It was an offer that Tex Sargo, however, couldn't accept. Dead men don't drink. . . .

I STOOD up, and I'll admit I was figuring on the rewards I'd get from the banks and the express company when Sargo's loot was turned over to them. My figuring was interrupted by Lita, who was whimpering and squeaking as she pawed at her bustle.

"But I can't help it," she sobbed when I told her to shut up. "When I jerked away from Gootch, I sat down in a mess of sandburrs!"

"I'll help you pick 'em off," Specs hastened to offer.

"You'll hightail to the nearest telephone and call the sheriff," I contradicted him. "I saw a pumping station back about a mile, and there'll be a phone there. Get the car and hit for it."

When Specs had gone, I steered Lita through the fence and away from the graveyard. The next fifteen minutes, then, I spent picking sandburrs. When I'd finished, Lita turned, looked up at me for a moment, then put her arms around my neck. This time, I gave her hearty, full co-operation, and poured on the smooch. For a dizzy minute, Lita held onto me, her kisser working overtime, and then, gasping, "Oh, how dare you!" she jerked

away and slapped me.

"I expected that," I jeered, grabbing her by her shoulders. "You figure to get me smoked up, then give me the ice works to get even with me for not falling over myself first time I saw you."

"What about it?" she sniffed.

I shook her. "If you're just getting even, forget it. That is, if you want me to forget that, while Lint Gootch beat up those church trustees, using a sap, it was Ab Gurn, using his hands, who ran the lease man, Biggs, out of the field so you could get Biggs's job. No doubt Biggs was a louse and Atex was better off with you in and him out—but how's Ed Neal going to like the way you got in? Think he'd pay you that bonus if he found it out?"

"Oh, you can't tell Neal. Please!" Lita begged. "Ab Gurn would have chased Biggs, anyhow, and I wanted the chance to make the deal for the lease for the prestige it would give me, more than I wanted it for the money involved. Why, I've promised Gurn half of the bonus."

"Which is it, then?" I demanded. "Are you going to stop this stand-off foolishness?"

The way she answered that left no doubts at all, and we were still locked in a Laocoon clinch when Specs drove up.

"Sheriff's coming right out—Hey!" he squawked.

"Hey what?" I echoed, keeping one arm around Lita.

"I mean—Aw, howinell do you do it?" Specs sounded sad.

"Might be my looks and my brain," I modestly conceded.

"With a dash of blackmail and coercion," Lita added, snuggling up close to me.

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THUNDER PASS

SIX hours before, he'd stepped from the Bent City stage, dusty, tired without a penny in his pockets, having dropped six hundred dollars to a faro dealer in Leesville. Now he had money in his pocket, a new suit of clothes, and a job snaking a bull outfit up the Pipestem River. That job paid more than he'd received with Samuel Brothers in Denver as chief wagon-master.

Cole Barrett came out of the barber shop off the main square of Bent City. He waited till a string of freight wagons had passed in front of him, headed for the Ward & Byrnes yards at the west end of town, and then he crossed in the direction of the Capitol Saloon.

It had been a small miracle landing the

job with Ward & Byrnes, but the letter of recommendation from Samuel Brothers seemed to have done the trick. Cole Barrett lit a long black cigar and watched the Ward & Byrnes wagons rolling along the street, lifting powdery dust, bullwhackers in blue flannel shirts, battered broad-brimmed hats and high-legged boots plodding on the left side of the high Murphy wagons snapping blacksnake whips, hurling curses at the slow-moving oxen.

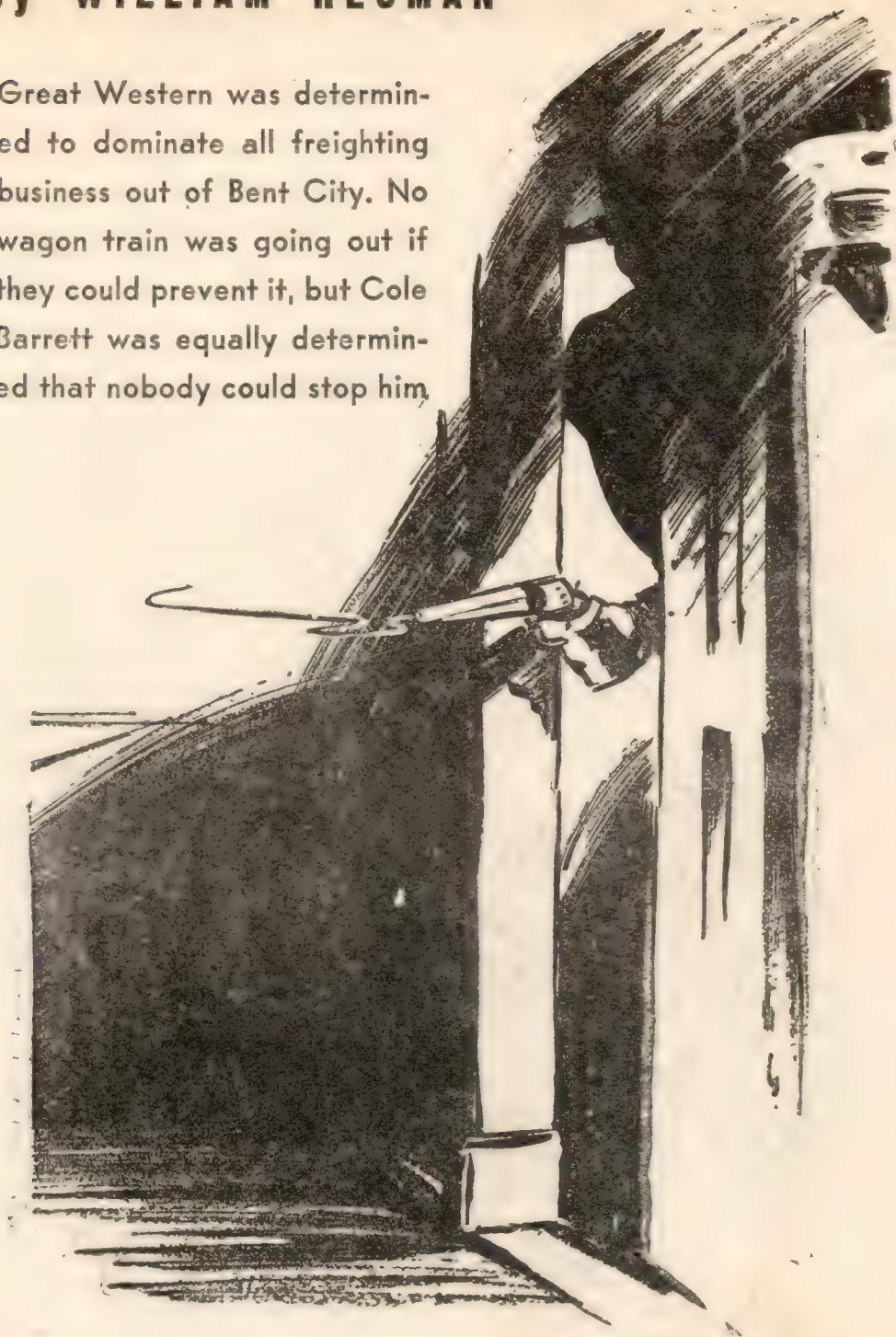
The oxen seemed to be in good shape and the wagons were comparatively new. Cole's first impression, when Jason Ward offered him the job, was that Ward & Byrnes were on the downgrade and could get no help. It was for that reason they'd asked him to recruit his own crew for this

Crouching, Cole got off three shots into the darkened room.



By WILLIAM HEUMAN

Great Western was determined to dominate all freighting business out of Bent City. No wagon train was going out if they could prevent it, but Cole Barrett was equally determined that nobody could stop him,



trip to Jefferson Point on the Pipestem. The request, Cole Barrett knew, was an unusual one. Ordinarily, a freighting company had a dozen crews out on the trail, with sufficient bullwhackers, horse herders, cooks and commissaries to go around. But Jason Ward did not want to use his own men, even though he'd stated emphatically that they'd like the freight at Jefferson Point by the twenty-first of the month, and this was the second. It was nearly four hundred miles from Bent City to the shipping point on the Pipestem, which meant that there would be no leisure time on the trip.

"What's the cargo?" Cole had asked the lean, hawk-faced Jason Ward.

The answer had been rather vague, and Ward stared at him shrewdly as if trying to read his mind. Ward had ascertained first of all that Cole had just come from the stage station, and that he'd stopped to visit with no one.

"Mostly Indian trade goods," the senior member of Ward & Byrnes had stated.

Edwin Byrnes, a mild-mannered man with reddish sideburns, listened, fumbled nervously with a pencil, and said almost nothing. Both men seemed relieved when Cole accepted the position.

"There'll be fifteen wagons," Jason Ward had stated. "That means you'll have to recruit fifteen bullwhackers, and maybe three herders, along with a cook."

"When do we start?" Cole wanted to know.

The answer to this question had also surprised him.

"The wagons are loaded," Jason Ward said quietly, "and ready to leave when you are." He added then, "As soon as you get your crew together." He hadn't offered to explain why it was necessary to recruit a special crew for this trip, and Cole hadn't questioned him. It was enough that he had the position when he'd contemplated doing anything, even mule-skinning, until he got back on his feet.

Back in Denver, Samuel Brothers had thought he was out of his mind when he offered his resignation. He was offered a junior partnership in the firm because he'd helped build it up to the biggest freighting line in the southwest. Samuel Brothers

Freighting had grown to a half-million-dollar concern, employing two thousand teamsters and fifteen thousand head of oxen and mules.

COLE BARRETT stood now on the corner of the main square in Bent City and thought about this. In Denver he could have been a big man, but here he was unknown. This was the northern freighting field, many of the lines just opening up, sprouting out from the railroad terminals like the fingers of a man's hand.

"Forget about that woman," John Samuels had advised him. "This is a big country, and plenty more of them in it."

"I'll look around." Cole had smiled, and John Samuels had immediately realized he'd said the wrong thing. Rose Wycliffe had married Jim Cannivan, commissary of the Samuel Brothers Line, and she couldn't have gotten a better man. Cole Barrett conceded this point because Cannivan had been his best friend. But he didn't concede that he had to stay in Denver and watch them together, remembering all the time that Rose had once gone around with him. He didn't like to be continually turning down Cannivan's invitations to have supper with them. Jim Cannivan had married her because she loved Cannivan, and there was nothing anyone else could do about it. *Love*, Cole Barrett thought, *is a damned queer business.*

In Bent City dusk was coming very rapidly, bringing with it a cooling breeze from the far-off Lone Bear Mountains. Standing off the square, Cole watched the lights coming on in some of the buildings. He was not a big man in point of size, but there was a certain compactness about him, and a solidness to his shoulders which made other men look twice before crossing him.

Puffing on the black cigar, Cole Barrett watched life come to Bent City as the hot sun left it. The cool breeze swept out the humidity as with a broom. The air seemed cleaner; objects took on a clearer hue even with the sun going down.

Bent City was not as large as Denver, but it was as Denver had been a dozen years before when Cole had come out from

Illinois and gotten his job with Samuel Brothers. The freight lines from Bent City were pushing up toward the northwest, taking in the Black Hills and all the streams running off from the Pipestem River, covering two thousand square miles of territory.

The cigar gripped in his teeth, Cole stepped into the Capitol Saloon, pushing both hands against the batwing doors as he went in and nearly knocking down a very short man whose head was below the level of the doors.

This man howled as the doors backed into his face and chest, sending him staggering. He was no more than five feet three, but with tremendously broad shoulders. He wore the red flannel shirt of a bullwhacker, and the broad-brimmed slouch hat, the marks of the trade. His hair was red, and his face was inflamed with drink.

"Very sorry," Cole apologized. "I didn't see you, friend."

The little bullwhacker rubbed his nose ruefully. His eyes were bright blue, filled now with mock anger.

"Damn' few people in this town see me, mister," he growled. "I'll be stepped on once too often."

"I believe," Cole chuckled, "that calls for a drink." He liked this little man with the tremendous shoulders—liked him because even in his drinks he could retain his sense of humor.

"Reckon nobody ever said Lou Benjamin turned down a free drink." The short man grinned. "I'll have it now."

Cole Barrett walked toward the bar, pushing his way through the crowd of men around the card tables, surprised that so many men should be in a saloon at this early hour, but it had been that way when Denver was just booming. The saloons had been filled even in the mornings. A new town like Bent City would be full of drifters, and men who had just come in looking for honest employment. They would be in the saloons because all business was transacted in the saloons.

The bartender stared as Lou Benjamin came up, and then he said grimly:

"No credit, brother."

Benjamin placed two huge hamlike

"Love is a queer business," Cole had thought.



hands on the bar and smiled sweetly.

"Shall I push your face through this damned bar?" he asked.

"Ten like you—" the bartender started to say. Cole Barrett lifted a finger and placed a gold piece on the bar. Jason Ward had had him sign the contract to deliver the freight to Jefferson Point, and then he'd given him an advance on his salary, along with an extra hundred dollars to be used in recruiting men.

That had been the third thing to surprise Cole Barrett.

"They trust a man in this town," he observed.

Jason Ward had studied him closely. "I think," he said, "we can trust you, Mr. Barrett."

COLE looked at the little bullwhacker thoughtfully now.

"Need a job?" he asked.

Lou Benjamin finished his drink, wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve, and said softly:

"You got one, friend?"

"I need fifteen teamsters," Cole stated. "We're pulling out of Bent City tomorrow."

"Who's 'we'?" the bullwhacker asked.

"Ward and Byrnes," Cole Barrett said. He saw the big grin spreading across Benjamin's face.

"Jefferson Point?" Benjamin asked.

"That's right," Cole nodded. "You want a job?"

Lou Benjamin started to shake his head back and forth slowly.

"They finally got a man." He chuckled.

"There ain't a wagonmaster in Bent City will handle that load, friend."

"Why not?" Cole wanted to know.

"Great Western don't want 'em to," the bullwhacker said. "Ain't that reason enough, mister?"

Cole Barrett smiled, the coldness coming into his gray eyes. "I'm taking that load out of Bent City tomorrow," he said smoothly, "if I have to hitch the fifteen wagons together and snake them myself."

Benjamin rubbed his jaw thoughtfully, the glint coming to his own blue eyes.

"Reckon any man who goes along with you, mister, will find his own little piece o' hell."

"I'm paying a dollar and half a day," Cole said. "I need fifteen like you, Benjamin."

"Now," the little man said, grinning, "you need only fourteen, friend."

Cole Barrett hooked the toe of his boot through an empty chair at one of the nearby tables and pulled it toward him. Picking up an empty whiskey bottle on the bar, he stepped on top of the chair, bent down, and began to hammer on the bar with the bottom of the bottle.

The noise stopped most of the conversation in the big room. The men at the card

tables swung around curiously. Cole Barrett saw a heavy-set man, with peculiar flaxen-colored hair, come through a doorway on the left. This man wore a buckskin vest, and he carried a Colt six-gun on his left hip. His eyes were hard and green like emeralds.

"I need fourteen bullwhackers," Cole said quietly. "One cook and a commissary. We pull out tomorrow morning." He let his eyes roam over the crowd and then he added, "We're heading for Jefferson Point on the Pipestem."

The man with the yellow hair straightened up abruptly, and his jaws started to tighten. He wasn't a bullwhacker, but he called sharply:

"Ward & Byrnes?"

"All right," Cole said.

The yellow-haired man was grinning now, looking around the room at the bullwhackers and teamsters as if challenging them to step forward. None did.

"We're paying good money," Cole went on suavely. "Five dollars in advance." He held out a roll of greenbacks.

"Get off that damned chair, friend," the man in the doorway called softly.

Cole smiled at him. He put the bills back inside his coat, as none had come forward to sign up; but he stayed on the chair.

"That's Great Western," little Lou Benjamin murmured, standing directly behind Cole. "I figured Orv Kramer wouldn't like this."

Orv Kramer started to walk forward, solid, square-cut shoulders swinging slightly. He had a thick neck, bulging with ropy tendons. There was a small grin around the corners of his thin-lipped mouth.

"Get off that chair, brother," he said again.

COLE BARRETT saw the bullwhackers in the room grinning and winking at one another, enjoying this. Cole turned to the bartender behind him.

"You mind if I recruit men here?" he asked.

The man looked uncomfortable. "It's been done before," he growled.

Orv Kramer stopped and pointed a fin-

ger at him. Kramer was still grinning.

"You want this place wrecked, Sam?" he asked softly.

"No," Sam muttered, "I don't."

Orv Kramer came up to within a yard of Cole and stopped there, hands on hips. He ignored the bartender contemptuously now.

"So you figure on goin' to Jefferson Point," Kramer chuckled.

Cole nodded. He was watching Kramer's green eyes, knowing that they would give away the man's next move. He'd had his fights with tough galoots in Denver, and he knew all the moves. When Kramer's eyes contracted slightly, Cole was braced to move.

Kramer's right foot swung out and he tried to kick the chair from beneath the new Ward & Byrnes wagonmaster. Cole went up into the air lightly, jumping just as Kramer's boot came in contact with the chair rungs. The chair skidded away, and as Cole Barrett's feet touched the sawdust-strewn floor, he'd already drawn back his right fist.

He got his hundred and seventy-five pounds behind the blow, and it caught Kramer flush on the jaw, knocking him back into one of the card tables. It was two steps to the bar where the empty whiskey bottle was standing. Cole Barrett scooped it up, and holding it by the neck, let it fly.

The bottle took Kramer full in the stomach as he came off the table. The wind left the man's body in one big belch. He doubled up, mouth open, hawking for air.

Cole Barrett went to him calmly. His punches were short and accurate as he beat Kramer to his knees. He was stepping back when something hit him on the back of the head, knocking him forward. Another man came from his left, swinging a big fist at his face. Two more came in from the other side, driving him against the wall of the saloon.

Big fists pounded at his face before he could break away. There were five men at him now, faces tense, and none of them was a bullwhacker. He'd seen this type before; they were hardcases, hired for one purpose—to fight with fists or guns.

Beaten to his knees by the fury of the

attack, Cole tugged desperately inside his coat, trying to bring out the Smith & Wesson .38 he usually carried tucked inside his waistband.

A boot took him in the chest, and then another fist struck him on the side of the head, rolling him over. He was trying to get to his knees again with the five men kicking at him when he heard the bellow of rage outside the circle.

Something catapulted in among the hardcases with the force of a charging bull. Two of them were knocked back against the wall. A third was picked up bodily by the squat little Lou Benjamin, and hurled across a card table.

Cole Barrett managed to reach his feet, but his head was still ringing, and he staggered as he swung at a face close at hand.

"Give it to 'em, boys!" Benjamin howled, face red and shining. He had one man around the waist and was bouncing him back against the wall, jolting the breath from his body.

Other bullwhackers were moving in, growling in their throats, balling heavy fists. Cole Barrett lunged at one man, and then a gun barrel was slashed down across the side of his skull. He pitched forward on his face, hearing sounds, seeing legs all around him, feeling no pain. And then suddenly it was very quiet.

CHAPTER II

Ambush

COLE was aware next of a light shining in his face, and his head felt as if it were blowing up, ready to burst. The dizziness assailed him again, and the veil slid across his eyes, but it passed away. He could hear Lou Benjamin speaking then, the anger in his throat.

"They damned near did him in," Benjamin grated.

"Great Western?" another man asked, and Cole recognized this as the voice of Jason Ward.

He managed to sit up then, and he discovered that he was in the Ward & Byrnes warehouse. A lantern hung from one of



the rafters, and he'd been looking into this light.

Lou Benjamin sat beside him, daubing at his face with a wet cloth, washing away the blood from the cuts. Another person was in the warehouse with them—a boy in buckskin shirt and black slouch hat. He sat with his small brown hands clasped in front of him, hazel eyes studying Cole carefully.

When the "boy" spoke, Cole's mouth

opened in surprise. He looked at Jason Ward.

"Meet Diana Flynn," Ward said. "Diana is George Flynn's sister."

Cole remembered that a man by the name of George Flynn was to receive the cargo at Jefferson Point.

"How do you feel?" Diana Flynn wanted to know. She stood up, and Cole noticed that she was quite tall for a girl—made even more so by the buckskin outfit



The bottle caught the man full in the stomach as he came off the table.

she wore.

"That gun barrel did the damage," Cole admitted. "I'll pay that one back."

Jason Ward looked at the girl and then nodded approvingly.

"He's tough," Diana Flynn said. "He'll do."

Lou Benjamin helped Cole to his feet and he stood there for a few moments until he'd settled himself. He looked at the little bullwhacker and he said quietly:

"That drink I bought you, friend, went a long way."

Benjamin shook his head. "I don't like to see five on one," he growled. "Never had any damned use for that Orv Kramer anyway."

"They all Kramer's friends?" Cole asked him.

"All Great Western," the bullwhacker muttered. "I'll have a knife in my own back if I don't get out o' this town."

Cole turned to Jason Ward for the explanation. The freighting man scratched his chin uncomfortably.

"I should have warned you, Barrett," he said slowly, "but I was afraid you'd walk out on us. I haven't been able to get a wagonmaster to take that load up to Jefferson Point, and I promised George Flynn I would deliver."

"Great Western Fur," Diana Flynn said, "doesn't want the cargo to reach my brother."

"Fur," Cole Barrett stated. "That it?"

The girl nodded. "Great Western came into the Pipestem country after my brother and I had been established for five years trading with the Indians. They tried to run us out so that they could dominate the trade. They have traders on every stream now, and they won't stop until George is run out of the mountains."

"They don't want the trade goods to reach your brother?" Cole asked.

Diana Flynn smiled grimly. "Only a small part of the cargo consists of trade goods," she said. "The rest of it will go inside a small sidewheeler my brother is building up at Jefferson Point. He's brought in a few carpenters from the States and the boat is about finished."

Jason Ward said thoughtfully:

"It's impossible to get a steamboat up the Pipestem because of the rapids, but the river is navigable beyond Jefferson Point. With a boat George Flynn can move up and down a dozen smaller streams, carrying his cargo with him, and moving twice as fast as Great Western traders."

"The boat," Diana Flynn added, "is designed to navigate shallow streams. My brother purchased the engine, firebox, boiler, and pistons in the East and had it shipped here to Bent City."

"The stuff had been lying in our yards for weeks," Jason Ward growled. "I have a dozen men guarding it night and day, but I can't get it on the Trail. Every man in this town is afraid of Great Western."

"That Orv Kramer is worse with a six-gun," Lou Benjamin chimed in, "than with his fists, an' he has plenty o' friends. Any man tries to buck Great Western is runnin' up against the biggest fur outfit in the West."

"Does Great Western know you have the machinery in the yard?" Cole asked.

"Every man in town knows it," Jason Ward scowled. "And there it lays."

"It'll roll tomorrow," Cole Barrett said tersely. He stared at Lou Benjamin. "If our friend here can bring in fourteen more teamsters."

Benjamin was nodding emphatically. "Lot of the boys liked the way you lit into Kramer." He chuckled. "We never had much use for that outfit to begin

with. I'm thinkin' I kin bring some of 'em around if there's gonna be a fight on the Trail."

DIANA FLYNN was watching Cole closely. "You understand," she said, "that Great Western will make every effort to stop you. They know that if my brother gets the sidewheeler into the water, he'll cut into their trade so deeply that they'll have to pull out of the Pipestem country."

"I've had boys try to stop my outfits before," Cole Barrett said. He remembered those fights in the southern lines—battle royals for new trade, rate-cutting, clubbing of bullwhackers.

"Maybe," the girl said, "you've never fought against Great Western."

"And maybe," Cole Barrett observed. "Great Western never fought against me." He saw her grinning and he knew that she liked that kind of talk. That was one of the reasons Rose had eventually steered clear of him. Wherever he went, trouble followed, and he'd never gone out of his way to avoid it. She liked peace; she wanted a man like Jim Cannivan who got in no one's way, who was everybody's friend. *A lot of people,* Cole Barrett thought, *don't deserve friends!*

"We'll see," Diana Flynn said, "when we get on the road."

Cole let this sink in a moment, and then he said quietly.

"I take no women with me, Mr. Ward."

The girl smiled at him calmly. "I came down here with a trapper from my brother's post," she stated chuckling, "and I'll be going back with him. We intend to keep in sight of the outfit, Mr. Barrett."

Cole frowned. "You don't think we'll bring it through?" he asked.

"You'll need every gun," she said, "if trouble starts—and I don't want this load lost."

Jason Ward cleared his throat and then said hastily:

"If you intend to leave in the morning, Mr. Barrett, you'd better get plenty of rest tonight. That knock on the head didn't help you."

Cole turned to Lou Benjamin.

"Round up your teamsters," he said. "Have them in the yard at dawn."

"I'll see what I can do." The short man grinned. "You won't be gettin' the best bullwhackers in Bent City."



The third man he hurled clear across the card table.

"I'll use any man who can handle a blacksnake whip," Cole said. He saw another man coming through the door from

the yard—a tall man, well-built. As he stepped into the light of the lantern, Jason Ward turned and said:

"Emmett Fair, Mr. Barrett. Fair is our new commissary and he's consented to go along on the trip to Jefferson Point."

Cole shook hands with the tall man. Fair was dark-haired, with long sideburns. He looked at Cole Barrett, and then his dark eyes swiveled to Diana Flynn.

"Glad to have you, Mr. Fair," Cole said. He noticed that Fair's grip was very strong.

"Luck on the trip," Fair murmured. He had a nice set of teeth with a brief black mustache on the upper lip.

OUTSIDE, walking past the fifteen big Murphy wagons lined up in the yard, Cole Barrett saw the guards Jason Ward had set up in the yard. Two of them came past, shotguns hanging loosely in the crooks of their arms.

Fair and Diana Flynn were walking up ahead toward the company office, and Cole noticed that they seemed to have met before. He was surprised then when the girl came toward him, leaving Fair standing in the patch of light outside the door.

She said softly: "Watch him carefully, Mr. Barrett."

Before Cole had a chance to reply, she had stepped out through the gate and was walking down the street. He knew which man she was speaking about. Fair still stood outside the door, lighting a cigar. He said a few words to Jason Ward and then nodded to Cole.

"Staying at the Bent City Hotel?" he asked pleasantly.

Cole shook his head, "Madison House," he said. He'd taken a room there after Jason Ward had advanced him the money.

"Thought I would walk up with you," Fair said. "Heard about your trouble in the Capitol Saloon."

"I'm all right," Cole assured him. "See you in the morning." He went out with Lou Benjamin, and then the little bullwhacker turned off in the direction of the Capitol Saloon. It was still quite early in the evening with the saloons and gambling houses along both sides of the street doing a roaring business.

"Reckon you better keep out o' sight the rest of this night." Benjamin grinned. "I had quite a time gettin' you out o'

that damned place. The fight was still goin' on when I left through the side door."

Benjamin turned off at the next corner, and Cole headed for the hotel on the street beyond. His head was still throbbing from the blow with the gun barrel. The cut had not been too deep, but it had been enough to render him unconscious.

Angling across the street, he walked past two more saloons, skirting a crowd of men on the walk. Beyond the glow of light from this saloon an alley dropped off toward the waterfront.

A drunk staggered out of this alley, mumbling something to himself. Cole Barrett gave him a wide berth, but the man staggered again, lurching toward him.

Cole shot out one hand, holding the man by the shoulder and pushing him back. He was rewarded with a curse, and then the drunk swung a fist at his stomach. It was too dark to see the man's face. Cole felt the knuckles slide past his belt and he pushed hard, sending the man back against the wall of the building.

"Why . . . damn you—!" the drunk spluttered, but Cole already had his Smith & Wesson out of the belt. The drunk heard the hammer click as it was cocked, and then he ran down the alley, seeming to be running faster and straighter than a drunken man ordinarily would.

Cole Barrett stared after him thoughtfully, and then put the gun away. He went to his room on the second floor of the Madison House, walking down a dimly lighted corridor. A single kerosene lamp bracket hung at one end of the hallway, providing a meager light.

OPENING the door with his key, Cole crossed the room in the darkness, felt around for the shade, and then lowered it before striking a match and lighting the lamp on the table. He stayed away from the window, not wishing to show his shadow before it, and he slipped out of his coat.

It was then that he noticed that the front of his vest was slit open, the lower half dangling down. He stared at this for several seconds in astonishment, knowing that when he'd left the Ward warehouse the vest had not been cut. He'd dusted

Rolling the man over,
he picked up the bottle.



himself off, and he would have noticed this had it occurred in the Capitol Saloon brawl.

He remembered the drunk, then, on the way down to the hotel. The drunk had been the only one close enough to him, but the man had swung at him with his fist. Looking down at the neatly sliced

vest, Cole Barrett realized the drunken man had had a razor-sharp knife in his hand when he'd lunged at him. That knife had missed the stomach by a fraction of an inch, cutting open the vest.

Cole Barrett sat down in a chair and placed the Smith & Wesson on the table in front of him. He'd been very close to

death out on the main street of Bent City, and within twenty-five feet of a group of citizens! Robbery had not been the motive. The man in the alley had waited for him soberly with the intent to kill!

Sitting in front of the table, he had one thought: *Great Western did not waste time.* He'd been watched at the Ward warehouse; he would be watched every moment that he was in Bent City, and they would never rest until he was dead. Great Western had too much at stake to permit a total stranger to break it up.

Cole got up a half hour later and walked over to the carpet bag he'd dropped in a corner of the room earlier in the day. He was bending over the bag when a gun cracked from the alley below, the slug crashing through his window and embedding itself in the ceiling.

Leaping across the room, Cole scooped up the Smith & Wesson from the table and darted for the door. Throwing it open, he took one step into the corridor, and then plunged forward on his face.

He had one glimpse of a man standing in the darkened doorway directly across the hall. He saw the blue barrel of a gun held in this man's hand, and he realized that he'd run into a very neat trap. The shot from the alley had been intended to bring him out of the room, directly into the path of a bullet.

CHAPTER III

Whiskey Washout

THE roar of a six-gun filled the narrow corridor, and Cole Barrett felt the slug clip the lobe of his left ear. Even as he went down he managed to get off a shot with his own Smith & Wesson, and he heard the bullet splinter the door which was ajar behind the killer. He could not see the man's face in the darkness of the doorway. He had a glimpse of a flat-crowned sombrero, and he could gauge the height of the man by the distance from the top of the hat to the door sill. The killer was quite tall.

Rolling as he hit the floor, Cole got off another wild shot, and he saw the man disappear into the room. Cole got up on

his knees and fired a third shot into the darkened room before plunging in through the door himself.

Cole felt the current of cold air in here and he knew that the window was opened. Half-expecting another shot, he looked out, gun leveled. The window opened on a narrow ledge, and it was but a short drop into the alley from this ledge. He could hear no sounds below.

There were steps on the stairs coming up, and he waited in the corridor until the hotel clerk came up, a scared old man, fumbling with a big six-gun.

"Who had that room?" Cole asked quietly, nodding toward the open door.

The old man shook his head. "It was empty, Mr. Barrett," he said.

"Anybody come up the stairs before or after I came in?" Cole wanted to know. He knew he wouldn't get a satisfactory answer because he'd seen the old man drowsing over a month-old newspaper when he came into the hotel himself.

"Didn't see anybody," the clerk muttered.

Cole walked over to the doorway and stood in it. The killer's head had been at least two inches higher than his own. It had not been Orv Kramer because Kramer was more nearly his own size.

Other roomers were coming out into the hotel now that the firing had stopped. Gunpowder smoke still drifted up near the ceiling, and the smell was in the air.

"I'll bring up Sheriff Nolan," the clerk told him.

Cole shook his head. "Tell your sheriff to get around before the shooting begins," he said. "He's no good when it's over."

Back inside the room, he sat down on the bed, the gun still in his hands. In less than thirty minutes two attempts had been made on his life, both of them diabolically clever. In the same evening he'd been engaged in a lusty barroom brawl and had received a crack on the skull with a six-gun. He wondered how Rose would have taken that had she married him!

IN the morning the fifteen Murphys rolled out of the Ward yards, four span of oxen to the wagon, and a small herd

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The man screamed as he toppled over the precipice.

of spare animals trudging in the dust behind them.

Cole Barrett rode a solid dapple gray he'd picked out of the Ward & Byrnes stables. At the head of the column, Lou Benjamin plodded beside his wagon, glancing back now and then at the fourteen sour, sobered bullwhackers coming behind him.

Cole had watched these men in the yards yoking up the teams. None of them had had any sleep to speak of the previous evening. Benjamin had advanced them money on this trip and they'd blown it in before the night was over. They were ill-humored, a little apprehensive now that they were actually hitting the trail. For

weeks no teamsters in Bent City would sign up for this trip.

"Pretty poor crew," Emmett Fair observed. He came up alongside Cole as the wagonmaster sat his horse outside the Madison House. Dawn had broken only thirty minutes before, but there were many people on the streets for the express purpose of seeing this bull outfit take off. The news had spread through Bent City that Jason Ward had finally signed a wagonmaster for the trip; the news also had spread that this wagonmaster had bested the tough Orv Kramer the night before.

Cole Barrett glanced out of the corners of his eyes at the Ward commissary man. He remembered the warning Diana Flynn had given him; he'd made a few quiet inquiries concerning Fair, and the answers were far from satisfactory. Fair had come to Bent City a few weeks ago and Jason Ward had signed him up because he'd applied for the job. Why Fair wanted to go along on this trip, when every other Ward & Byrnes employee had backed out of it, was a mystery.

"They'll sober up," Cole stated, nodding toward the bullwhackers. "Three days on the trail and they'll be ready for anything." Jason Ward had passed out rifles and six-guns to each teamster. The short arms they carried in holsters around the waist, and the rifles, heavy Sharps guns or Henrys, were within easy reach.

Cole turned the gray horse and rode up the street with Fair beside him. He noticed another thing about the commissary man. Fair was a very tall man, and the killer who'd stood in the doorway opposite his room had been exceedingly tall, probably over six feet two.

Moving past the Capitol Saloon, Cole Barrett saw the group of men standing on the porch, watching silently. He spotted the yellow-haired Orv Kramer leaning against a porch pillar, thumbs hooked in his gun belt, a cold smile around the corners of his mouth.

As Cole trotted by, Kramer nodded to him grimly. He called softly:

"Nice trip, mister."

Cole recognized three of the men who had joined Kramer in the fight. Two of them had bruises on the face, and the

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third had his right arm in a sling. Another man leaned against the wall of the saloon building, a brown-paper Mexican cigarette dangling from his thin lips, a bored grin on his face. This man was tall, spare, almost gangling. Thick black hair hung down about his neck and curled around his ears. He carried a Navy Colt on his right hip, and the holster seemed to have seen much use.

Emmett Fair said without looking toward the porch:

"The chap behind Kramer is Blaise Gilman from Dodge City. Must be working with Great Western now."

Cole Barrett's eyes flickered. He'd never seen Gilman, but he'd heard many tales about the killer from Dodge. Gilman was reputed to have shot at least fifteen men; he'd been sheriff of Dodge, but his gun usually went to the highest bidder.

"You get around," Cole stated.

Fair shrugged and smiled, revealing the white teeth. "I've been in Dodge," he admitted. The commissary man moved up the line, riding easily on a buckskin animal. Cole watched him say a few words to Lou Benjamin.

Jason Ward came over then to shake hands with Cole. The freightline owner was plainly worried.

"Kramer has signed up Blaise Gilman to work with him," Ward growled. "I'm thinking you'll have trouble on the trail, Barrett."

"We're ready for it," Cole said. He had another question. "What about Miss Flynn?"

"Left an hour ago," Ward said. "You'll meet her on the trail."

"No place for a woman," Cole snapped.

Jason Ward smiled. "She was raised up along the Pipestem," he explained. "She knows this country better than any of us, and she's safer out there than in the city."

Cole Barrett frowned. He'd known only women like Rose Cannivan, and she had been a town girl, afraid even of horses. This girl, riding across the plains with only an old trapper as an escort, was an enigma. Women belonged at home, Cole thought. They should stay there.

THEY made first camp that night, sixteen miles out of Bent City, on the Horn River. Diana Flynn rode in alone, coming out of the dusk, a rifle slung across the pommel of her saddle.

Cole watched her dismount and walk to the cook's fire for a cup of coffee. All the men knew her and none of them seemed surprised.

A tin cup in her hand, she strolled over to where Cole was squatting on a wagon tongue, cigar in his mouth.

"Shoot any Indians?" Cole asked her softly. "I'd like the tongues for breakfast."

Diana Flynn looked at him quietly. "We're after white men this trip," she observed, "and you know it."

Cole Barrett grinned. "Ward tells me you have a trapper riding around with you. Where is he?"

"Back in Bent City," the girl said, "watching Orv Kramer and Gilman. When they leave town he'll know it and tell us."

Cole nodded. "So you're riding these hills alone? That's a damned foolish bit of business."

She laughed chilly. "Any time you want, mister, you can ride with me," she said. She was going away when Cole called her back. He could see Fair talking with one of the night herders about to leave the corral.

"What do you know about our commissary man?" he asked. "I like to know whose side my men are on."

Diana Flynn drank the rest of the coffee before answering. She was watching Fair as she spoke.

"He came up to my brother's place on Jefferson Point," she said slowly. "Hung around for a week or so, just watching things, saying nothing. The next time I met him he was already working for Jason Ward as commissary. This is his first trip out."

Cole Barrett rubbed his chin. "We can't hang a man for that," he told her.

"In this country," Diana observed, "men have been hanged for less. I want this load to go through because if it doesn't my brother is finished on the Pipestem. We'll have to get out."

Cole watched her stare toward the dis-

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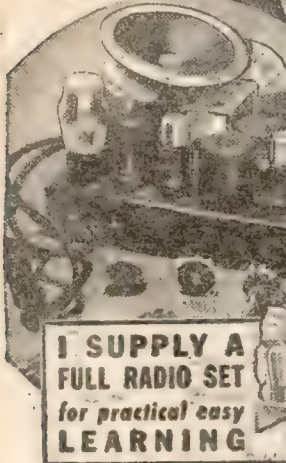
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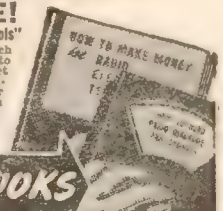
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tant hills, and he had an idea what it would mean if Great Western Fur drove the Flynns out of the country.

"My father established the post," she went on softly. "The Flynns have been on the Pipestem and its tributaries for over fifty years. We have friends even among the Blackfeet across the Canadian border."

"Your brother put everything he had into this sidewheeler?" Cole asked.

The girl nodded. "It's his last chance to get back the trade Great Western has taken away from us. They have a dozen agents working up along each stream, reaching the hunters with trade goods and whiskey even before we can get near them. It's the whiskey gets them to trade with Great Western."

"Thought they passed a law forbidding the sale of whiskey in the Indian Territories?" Cole said.

Diana Flynn laughed grimly. "The men who make those laws and the men who break them are two thousand miles apart."

Cole Barrett was silent for a moment. "You know this country," he said finally. "Where should we look for trouble?"

Diana Flynn looked toward the north then. "We have to pass through Cheyenne Gap in the Looking-Glass Mountains," she said. "The Gap is eight days journey from here. After that it should be easy rolling to Jefferson Point."

"What about the Gap?" Cole persisted.

"The Sioux wiped out a wagon train there in the old days," the girl explained. "The Gap is very narrow, and the trail runs along the left ridge of the wall. It's a two-hundred-foot drop to the bottom of the pass, and the trail is ten feet wide in places."

"No other way to get over the mountains?" Cole asked.

"Only if you have wings," Diana smiled. "It's eight miles through the Gap—a half day's journey."

Cole Barrett rubbed the toes of his boot in the sand. "Anybody ever make that run at night?" he asked suddenly. He saw the light come into the girl's eyes.

"It'll be as black as the pit down there," she murmured.

"This will be no picnic," Cole Barrett

told her grimly, "either way. I'd hate to have anyone stampede the animals over the edge of the trail." He added then, "Keep this to yourself."

THEY made eight miles the next morning before the noonday stop, and then seven more in the afternoon. Lou Benjamin came over to where Cole was feeding the dapple gray. The little bullwhacker's face was grim.

"Somebody's passin' out whiskey," he growled. "You hear that, Barrett?"

Cole listened to the singing from the fire. The night before the teamsters had turned in without a word, glum and worn-out. Tonight they were singing lustily the old freighter's song, *Root Hog or Die*.

"We don't have any rum in this cargo," Cole stated quietly. "Where did it come from?"

"Who made up the load?" Benjamin wanted to know. His blue eyes moved toward Emmett Fair, who was over near one of the wagons.

Cole Barrett straightened up, the hardness coming into his eyes. Fair had his back turned, but he heard Cole's step and he swung around, the usual smile on his face.

"Good time today, Barrett," the commissary man stated.

"Any whiskey in this load?" Cole asked him.

Fair grimaced. He looked toward the campfire and shook his head.

"They sounded too damned frisky," he admitted. He started to light a cigar. "Jason Ward never permits liquor on his wagons," he said. "I checked over every item in the cargo."

Cole nodded. "We'll see about this," he grated. He started to walk toward the cook's fire. Fair following behind him leisurely. Fair said:

"Hell of a thing if Kramer were to jump us with half the boys not knowing which end of the gun to use."

"Maybe," Cole Barrett snapped, "Kramer knows that, too."

He went into the circle of light and he stood there with his hands on his hips, the frown deepening on his face. A whiskey bottle was suddenly jerked out of sight



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behind a bullwhacker by the name of Jonah White.

Cole walked over to this man, rolled him over as he sat on the ground, and then picked up the half-emptied bottle. The other fourteen men, and the cook, a fat man with a greasy smile, watched without a word.

"Where did it come from?" Cole snapped. He looked around the circle, and he saw Diana Flynn moving up from the other end of the wagon corral.

Jonah White, a pig-faced man with small and reddish eyes, looked abashed.

"Found it in the cook's wagon," he admitted.

Cole Barrett spun around on the cook. The fat man rubbed a big hand over his face. He had a flattened nose and wide, flapping ears.

"What in hell's in that wagon," he stated, "ain't none o' my business, mister. You want to see the commissary man about that."

Emmett Fair looked into the fire. "I loaded no whiskey on these wagons," he stated quietly.

Cole Barrett smashed the bottle against a rock and strode away. They were running around in circles and getting nowhere. The cook didn't know, Fair didn't know, but the whiskey was still there.

Lou Benjamin came over after awhile, and Cole said morosely. "Who's that damn cook?"

"Chap by the name o' MacSween," the bullwhacker said. "Cooks are mighty hard to get, Barrett. I had to grab up the first one."

"You think Kramer reached him before he left with us?" Cole asked.

"Hard to say." Benjamin smiled. "Maybe Kramer, an' maybe that hombre Fair."

Diana Flynn joined them, her face tight.

"I could whip every one of them." Cole Barrett scowled. "But they'd have the same story. Jonah White found it in the cook wagon. The cook didn't know it was there, and Emmett Fair claims there was no whiskey loaded onto the wagons in Bent City."

"If they're drunk when they reach the Gap," Diana stated quietly, "they'll never make it even if no one interferes with us."

"Your trapper come out of Bent City yet?" Cole asked suddenly.

The girl shook her head. "Old Bill Merwin will stick till Kramer rides out, and I think Kramer and Gilman are waiting till we get near the Gap. They can ride out a week after we're gone and pass us in two days."

"Keep an eye on that cook MacSween," Cole said to Benjamin. "He may be all right, and he may know more than he pretends."

When Benjamin went away, Cole stared at the girl steadily.

"It's begun," he said. "It'll be a fight from now on."

"If I know you right," Diana Flynn told him, "you'll enjoy this."

Cole Barrett watched as she swung away toward one of the wagons. He saw Emmett Fair talking to the cook over near the fire, and MacSween was shaking his head. Fair came over then, and said grimly:

"The man says somebody smuggled the rum into the wagon."

"All right," Cole stated. "Tell them that the next man caught with whiskey on his breath walks back to Bent City."

"That'll never stop them," Fair observed. "They know you need them more than they need you. If there's whiskey in the camp they'll drink it."

"Then we'll keep it out," Cole snapped. "Any man caught prowling after the watch is set will be shot down like a dog. Pass that on."

Fair smiled faintly as he went away.

There was no drinking the next five days as they pushed toward the Looking-Glass Mountains. Already, Cole could see the cut in the range ahead, a narrow "V" which Diana Flynn identified as Cheyenne Gap.

CHAPTER IV

Perilous Pass

IN THE MORNING a grizzled old trapper rode in on a flea-bitten Indian pony. He had lank gray hair, a dirty, grease-blackened buckskin shirt and a coonskin cap.

Cole Barrett watched Diana Flynn talk-

ing with him for a few moments, and then both of them approached him. Diana spoke briefly:

"Old Bill says Kramer and Gilman rode out of Bent City yesterday with twelve men. They were headed north toward the Looking-Glass Mountains."

"See where they were camped?" Cole asked the trapper.

Bill Merwin cocked one eye and scratched his head. "Left 'em six miles to the west," he stated. "I kin pick up their trail any time I want to."

"They'll camp in the mountains," Diana said, puzzled. "Why?"

"Get back after them," Cole said to the trapper. "We want to know where they'll camp tonight."

When Merwin rode out again after having his coffee and bacon, Diana Flynn put the question to Cole a second time.

"Ever do any horse stealing?" he asked her.

"I have a lot of Crow friends and Shoshones in the mountains," Diana smiled. "They're the best horse stealers in the West."

"We're paying Kramer a little visit tonight," Cole Barrett said softly. "Don't let it go any farther than this."

"Stealing their horses!" She grinned. "They'll never be able to stop us on foot."

"Shouldn't be too hard," Cole observed, "with experienced horse stealers like yourself and Merwin with us."

They made camp that night within the shadow of Cheyenne Gap. Cole Barrett studied the pass carefully as the wagons were being formed corral-fashion.

"We should make it through there tomorrow morning," Emmett Fair stated, "assuming that everything goes all right."

Cole Barrett bit his lips. He watched a lone rider coming down through the Gap, riding without haste. Diana Flynn came over to them, shading her eyes

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against the low-hanging sun. The day had been tremendously hot—more so than usual. It was an oppressive heat with scarcely a ripple of breeze. Several times Cole had caught himself looking up into the sky. He didn't know much about the weather conditions in this northern country, but in the south this kind of heat meant rain—and plenty of it.

"It's Merwin," Diana Flynn said as the rider came closer.

Cole walked out to meet the trapper. Merwin was grinning a little.

"They're in a draw couple o' miles west o' the Gap," he explained. "Fourteen of 'em."

Cole nodded. He realized that his own party outnumbered Kramer's, but the Great Western man had all experienced gun-fighters in his crew—men who relished an encounter like this. The bullwhackers could not be depended upon in an emergency. They might fight, or they might be drunk.

"Pick out a fresh horse," Cole said to the trapper. "We're riding over to their camp in three or four hours."

Bill Merwin looked at his horse's neck. "Reckon we'll be gettin' a hell of a lot of rain afore mornin'," he said.

Cole glanced at the brazen sky. There were no clouds, but the sun was getting hazy.

"That'll be all the better," Cole said.

AFTER eating, Cole spoke briefly to Emmett Fair. The commissary man was second in command of the bull outfit. Fair sat on a rock, whittling at a stick of wood.

"Riding out tonight," Cole said. "I want to get an idea where Kramer's camp is."

Fair nodded. He glanced toward Bill Merwin, eating near the cook's fire, and a smile slid across the commissary's face. Cole Barrett stared at him grimly. It was evident Fair knew Merwin had already located the camp.

"We'll have a little squall before the night's over," Fair said. "Better not go too far."

Cole found Lou Benjamin greasing his wagon axles with tar. The little bullwhacker looked up, the sweat in his eyes.

"I'm riding out with the girl and Merwin tonight," Cole said briefly. "Keep an eye on Fair."

Benjamin mopped the sweat from his face with a piece of rag.

"I'll watch him," he growled.

An hour before midnight Cole saddled the gray and rode out of the corral. Already the bullwhackers were curled up under the wagons, tarpaulins drawn across the western sides of each wagon. Emmett Fair was still awake, smoking a cigar near the smouldering fire.

In the darkness beyond the corral, Cole picked up Diana Flynn and Bill Merwin. Without a word Merwin took the lead, riding east and north, at an angle from Cheyenne Gap. There was no moon tonight, and several times Cole thought he heard thunder in the distance.

"I wouldn't count on 'em havin' a guard posted," Merwin said softly. "They ain't worryin' about us."

"You have a plan?" Diana Flynn wanted to know.

"When we get their horses," Cole explained, "we'll hit through the Gap a few hours before dawn tomorrow. They'll never be able to catch up with us."

"Pretty rough goin' through the Gap in the dark," Merwin ventured.

"It'll be rougher," Cole said, "if we have to fight Kramer and Gilman." He turned to the girl. "How far is it to Jefferson Point from the Gap?"

"Another three days," he was told. "My brother might be able to send out a few men to help us get in. He's afraid to leave his post unguarded."

They were going up now, moving in through the hills, Merwin finding his way unerringly. After an hour's ride the trapper pulled up and dismounted. Very distinctly, Cole Barrett could hear the low rumble of thunder in the west. The air which had been very hot grew suddenly cool. A breeze started to blow from the west.

"That draw," Merwin said, "is about three hundred yards ahead."

They went forward on foot, Merwin leading them.

"Last I saw," the trapper whispered, "they had the hosses staked at the far

end o' the draw. We kin come in the back way an' walk right out with 'em."

Cole Barrett didn't say anything. He had the feeling that this thing was working out too easily, yet he realized that the simpler the plan the more probable it was that it would work out.

THEY were on hard rock now with Merwin cautioning them not to kick any pebbles. Already, Cole could smell wood smoke from the campfire. He listened for the stamp of the horses, but heard nothing. They were undoubtedly in the draw, but it was strangely quiet.

"Hold up," Cole said suddenly.

The three of them crouched on the ground, Cole slid his six-gun from the holster.

"What do you make of it?" he asked Merwin.

The trapper shook his head. "Reckon they moved them hosses to the other end," he growled. "I'll go around that way an' have a look."

When Merwin was gone, Diana Flynn whispered softly: "I don't like it."

Cole Barrett frowned. According to Merwin they should have been within a dozen paces of the staked horses, but they could see and hear nothing now.

Ten minutes later a shadow materialized out of the ground, and then Bill Merwin said gruffly:

"They're gone."

Cole jumped to his feet. "You sure?" he asked quickly.

"I came right through that damned draw," Merwin muttered. "Fire's dyin' out, but they skipped."

"We'll get back," Cole grated. "Kramer may have planned an attack tonight rather than tomorrow."

He heard Diana Flynns breathing hard as they raced back through the darkness toward the horses. Once she fell and he had to drag her to her feet.

"Take us back to the wagons the quickest way," Cole ordered. He could smell the rain in the air as they headed south, and a few minutes later the first drop splashed against his face.

They came out onto the plain and didn't know it until Cole realized the gray was

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running smoothly whereas before it had been picking its way carefully through rock.

It was then that they heard the distant shots. Cole put his spurs to the gray and felt it lengthen out. He saw the flashes of guns in the distance, and then he heard Merwin's yell:

"They're tryin' to run off the stock!"

Coming up closer, Cole could hear Lou Benjamin's bull-like roar as the teamster rallied his men. The rain was pouring down in sheets now, drenching them as they cut away from the wagon corral toward the herd.

They could see shadowy figures moving in front of them. The oxen were bellowing in fright and milling toward the center. A man called sharply:

"Head 'em out!"

Cole recognized the voice as that of Orv Kramer. He whirled the gray and plunged directly toward the flaxen-haired man, gun in hand. He couldn't see Karmar, and when he had ridden directly into the herd of oxen, he had to turn around again.

Bill Merwin and Diana Flynn had opened fire as they came in, both shooting into the air, not knowing who was friend or foe. A rider spurred out of the darkness, his animal brushing by Cole's gray.

"Kramer!" this man called.

Cole slashed at him with the barrel of his six-gun, missed, and nearly tumbled from the saddle. Sheets of rain swept down on them, making the prairie beneath them a morass in which the horses slipped and plunged wildly.

Cole lifted his voice and shouted hoarsely: "Benjamin!"

He heard the bullwhacker's return yell, and then the man rode up toward him, gun in hand. Several others were with him, and Cole heard Emmett Fair's quiet voice.

"They're getting out," Fair said. "You must have given them a scare coming up in the rear."

"Get the herd in toward the wagons!" Cole yelled. He could hear horses splattering away in the distance now, and then Diana Flynn rode up, a flash of lightning revealing her water-streaked face, wisps of hair falling over her forehead.

"They're heading back to the mountains," she called, relieved.

"How many men do you have?" Cole asked Benjamin.

Fair answered for him. "Six," the commissary man stated.

"Six!" Cole snapped. "Where in hell are the rest?"

"Drunk as lords," Benjamin scowled. "The whiskey started goin' around right after you left, Barrett. I kicked out the galoots who were still a little sober. This rain will cool 'em off so they kin work."

"One of the herders spotted Kramer's bunch," Fair said. "He opened fire on them and we got out as soon as we could. Kramer probably didn't know how many we had with us, and the rain, and your coming up in the rear, made him think twice."

Cole Barrett nodded. He looked at Diana Flynn, shivering next to him. The rain was still sweeping across the plains, thunder banging now, and the lightning illuminating the plains with light of day. He could see the stock, oxen and horses huddled together, the oxen bellowing.

"Get them in toward the wagons," he ordered Benjamin. "We'll see about this whiskey."

THEY found the remainder of the teamsters huddled under the wagons, stupefied with drink. Cole routed one of them out and made him stand in the rain until he was drenched through and shivering.

"Who passed out the rum?" Cole demanded. He poked his six-gun in the teamster's stomach and held it there, cocking the hammer.

The bullwhacker gulped and sobered up instantly.

"Cook got it out!" he yelped.

"Where's MacSween?" Cole asked quietly.

"I'll rout him out," Benjamin growled. "He knew Kramer was comin' up tonight an' he passed out the stuff."

Cole Barrett looked at Emmett Fair. The tall man had said nothing. He stood in the rain, his hat pulled low over his eyes.

"Couldn't you have stopped this?" Cole asked him coldly.

"They didn't make any noise tonight," Fair explained. "I suppose they were passing the stuff around to each wagon."

It was a reasonable explanation, but Cole thought he saw Diana Flynn's mouth tighten in the next flash of lightning.

Benjamin came back, shaking his head. "Run off," he said. "That damned cook was a Great Western man."

Cole nodded. He put the six-gun away and slipped out of his coat, which was drenched through and providing no further protection.

"Get all the men out into the rain," he ordered. "It'll sober them up. We're pulling out of here in thirty minutes."

Lou Benjamin gulped. "We're . . . we're rollin'?" he asked weakly.

"Start yoking up," Cole growled. "If we don't get through tonight we'll never make it tomorrow. They'll have an ambush set for us in the Gap. Tonight they won't be expecting us to move."

He noticed that the rain was letting up, although the thunder was still crackling along the horizon.

"Hell!" Lou Benjamin was saying.

"Put your wagon up front," Cole ordered. "We'll chain the entire string together so they can't wander off. You know this Gap."

"A night like this," the bullwhacker observed, "a man couldn't find his way around his own back yard."

"A man with a lantern," Emmett Fair stated, "could go up ahead. You could lead your team instead of driving them."

Cole nodded in agreement, again looking at Fair curiously.

"Get every man out into the rain," Cole ordered. "I want them wet." He watched Lou Benjamin tumbling the bullwhackers out into the rain, pushing them into water holes, slashing at them with the palms of his hands.

THE herders started to push the stock in closer toward the wagons. It took nearly an hour before the befuddled bullwhackers could yoke up their teams. The rain had stopped, but it was still dark. Cole ordered several lanterns lit, and then on second thought had a fire built. There was plenty of dry wood on the rack be-

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neath the cook's wagon, reserved for such occasions.

With a big fire roaring, they were able to dry their clothes to some extent, and it helped matters. Hot coffee was quickly distributed to the chilled men before Cole gave the order to roll out.

The fire was left flaming as the fifteen wagons pulled out of the circle and headed for the Gap. There were no whips and no swearing as Lou Benjamin started his team north.

Looking back, Cole could see the fire blazing behind them. Watchers from the hills would see that spot of light and assume that the outfit was still camped on the plains.

Diana Flynn and the trapper rode beside Cole as he took the lead. Emmett Fair trailed the caravan, guarding the rear.

The oxen splashed through mud, sliding and slipping, but moving steadily upward. Without seeing them, Cole Barrett felt the cliff walls close in on either side. Merwin said quietly:

"Keep in close. This trail gets smaller all the time."

After awhile they had to dismount and lead their horses. They could hear Benjamin coming up behind, swearing softly at his oxen, guiding them up the trail.

There had been a wind on the plains, but in here the air was still, chilled by the rain. There were no sounds, but the clank of chains and the rattle of traces.

"If they're camped more than a half mile from the Gap," Merwin said, "they'll never know we're goin' through."

"Unless,"—Cole grinned coldly—"they smell the liquor on the breath of these bullwhackers."

Looking up, he could see stars coming through the black vault of the heavens, indicating that the storm was definitely over. Far to the east they could hear the thunder rolling away, with the sky lighting up at intervals.

Benjamin's lead span went down in the loose rock and mud, and it took a while to get them righted. They moved on again, always going higher in the Gap. Cole sensed the fact now that a few feet to his left the trail dropped hundreds of feet to the pass floor. It was an eerie feeling. He

picked up a stone while they were disentangling Benjamin's span, and he tossed it away, waiting for the thud as it fell. There was no sound.

Diana Flynn stood near him, shivering from the cold.

"We're nearly halfway through," she said. "We'll make it now."

Cole glanced back down the line of wagons. One lantern hung from Benjamin's wagon, providing the only light. He sensed, rather than saw, that his outfit was still with him.

"I'll send Merwin on," Diana said, "when we're through the Gap. He can reach my brother by nightfall."

CHAPTER V

COLE BARRETT was feeling in his pockets for a wet cigar when he heard the gun from the end of the line. Three times a six-gun banged in the night from the direction of the last wagon. The shots were timed, indicating that it was a signal rather than desultory shooting.

Lou Benjamin swore aloud, and then yelled, "Fair!"

Cole already had his six-gun out and was running down the trail, cursing at himself now for not having sent Fair back days ago. He'd suspected the man from the beginning.

He'd passed halfway down the line when he heard two more quick shots, and then a third, but this time two separate guns made the noise. One was a heavy-caliber weapon.

Bullwhackers stared at him as he plunged past, with Benjamin coming behind.

"I'll slit his damned throat!" the little bullwhacker roared. "Kramer will be up here in ten minutes now."

Cole saw a man standing directly ahead of him—a tall man. He pulled up abruptly and leveled his gun.

"All right, Fair," he said tersely.

"That you, Barrett?" the commissary man asked. "Come up."

"Toss your gun up here," Cole grated.

There was a pause, and then he heard Fair's low laugh. He was waiting for the man's shot, holding his own gun on the commissary's middle, hammer cocked.

"Shoot him down!" Lou Benjamin yelled.

Cole heard Fair's gun drop a few feet away, and then he started to walk forward,

"Something to show you," Fair said quietly. "Strike a light. It can't do any more harm now."

Cole came up beside the commissary and jammed his gun into the man's back.

"Bring a light, Lou," he called back to the bullwhacker.

Fair did not seem concerned. He said quietly:

"Orv Kramer and Gilman will be coming up, Barrett. You'll have to move fast low."

Benjamin came up with a lighted lantern and Fair led them toward the rear wagon. They could see Fair's horse waiting, reins trailing on the ground. The body of a man was huddled on the ground on the left side of the wagon. His face was toward the earth, with both arms spread out.

Lou Benjamin rolled him over, held the lantern close, and then muttered:

"MacSween!"

"He was hiding on top of that wagon," Fair explained. "Probably had a tarpaulin over him. He figured on warning Kramer, and then skipping down the trail. I was waiting for him."

Cole Barrett shook his head in perplexity. "You're not a Great Western man?" he growled.

Fair smiled in the lamplight. "I'm from the Indian Bureau in Washington," he explained. "I was sent out to investigate the alleged whiskey smuggling among the Indians along the Pipestem. I've been in this country for several months gathering evidence against Great Western. They'll be prosecuted and put out of business when I make my report."

Cole Barrett whistled softly. "Did Jason Ward know you were a government man?" he asked.

Emmett Fair nodded. "He told me about this outfit going into the Pipestem country so I signed up with him. People were beginning to regard me with suspicion and I had to get some kind of job. I thought I could look around while I was up near Flynn's post."

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"We're not there yet," Cole said. "Kramer and his boys will be on top of us in a few minutes."

"A tough spot," Fair agreed. "We can't turn around here, and they'll probably block the road up ahead."

"Unless," Cole Barrett said suddenly, "we get there ahead of them." He turned and ran toward the head of the column again with Fair and Lou Benjamin behind him. They called the bullwhackers along the line to follow them.

DIANA FLYNN and Bill Merwin were waiting for them, having stayed at the head.

"MacSween was shot by Fair," Cole explained briefly. "MacSween sent a signal to Kramer and he's probably on the way now. We're going up to lay an ambush for them."

The girl had no questions to ask, but she looked at the commissary man and smiled her apologies.

"There'll be shooting this time," Cole said flatly. "I hope you'll stay with the train, Miss Flynn."

"I'll stay till the shooting begins," she said grimly. "This is my brother's load."

Cole Barrett shook his head. He started to run then with the seventeen men at his heels. He called back sharply to Lou Benjamin:

"Put that light out!"

The bullwhacker paused to extinguish the flame in the lantern, and they went on again a quarter of a mile along the trail in the Gap. Bill Merwin said suddenly:

"Lot o' boulders along the inside wall here, Barrett."

Cole pulled up. "This is as good a spot as any," he said. "Spread out and keep close to the wall. We won't open up until I fire first."

Emmett Fair felt around and dropped down behind a big rock off the trail. He said to Cole softly:

"Kramer's running into a neat trap, Barrett. You've outthought him all along the way."

"I went out to steal his horses tonight," Cole growled, "while he was stealing my stock. That wasn't too smart."

"A coincidence," Fair said. "It'll never happen twice."

They lay behind the boulders for five minutes before Lou Benjamin called from the advance post:

"Somebody comin'."

Cole spun the cylinders of his gun and crouched tensely. He heard a gun hammer click in the darkness behind him and he swore at the sound.

"They'll be on foot," Fair murmured.

Cole saw the dark shapes moving down the trail a few minutes later. More stars were showing now, providing somewhat more light, but there was no moon. It was possible to distinguish shapes, but not faces.

He let two men go past, and the third was very tall, as tall as the man who had stood in the doorway opposite his room at the Madison House. Cold anger swept through him. Blaise Gilman and Orv Kramer had set that neat trap at the hotel, and Gilman had tried to shoot him down from the doorway.

Cole came up slowly, gun steady in his hand. He knew he had to shoot very straight the first time, because there wouldn't be a chance to shoot again with a man like Gilman in front of him. He called out softly, tauntingly:

"All right, Blaise."

Even then he didn't think the lanky man could get off a shot that fast. Before he got the man's name out, orange flame leaped at him from a distance of a dozen feet. He'd started to move toward the left as he spoke, and it was this that saved his life.

Gilman's first shot went through his coat on the right side, the height of his heart. Cole let go at the flare of Gilman's gun, holding the gun very steady, and concentrating upon that one shot.

Gilman seemed to disappear, and then Orv Kramer's deep voice started to boom. Guns opened up all along the line. A man screamed as he lost his balance at the edge of the precipice, after being hit, and toppled down into the darkness.

"Don't let 'em get out!" Lou Benjamin roared.

Kramer had been one of the two men who'd gone on ahead of Gilman. Cole start-

ed after him. He heard Emmett Fair's gun crack, and he saw one of the men go down.

Kramer was roaring: "This way! We'll run the damned wagons over the wall!"

SEVERAL men raced past the spot where Cole was crouching. He fired at one of them, but missed, as they were running low. He knew then that he'd made his second mistake tonight. He should have kept some of the men at the train to prevent a break-through. If Kramer got to the wagons, he could hold them off with three guns in the road, and start the first wagon off the trail. In the darkness it would be an easy matter stampeding the oxen, and with the wagons chained together, one would drag the other with it.

"After them!" Cole yelled. He knew there were at least four men with Kramer, which made five guns in all. He saw a man a short distance ahead of him, running down the trail, and he fired. He thought that man stumbled, but he wasn't sure.

Then a gun started to crack, very deliberately, and he heard Orv Kramer cursing.

"That'll be Diana Flynn." Emmett Fair chuckled. "She's stopped them up."

Cole kept running. He saw the group of men crouching in the road straight ahead of him, and he emptied his gun at them. Two men staggered away, and one of these two pitched forward over the cliff wall.

A heavy-set man was standing up straight. His gun cracked, and Cole took the slug through the right leg just above the knee. He went down just as another bullet grazed the top of his head. It was the fall this time which saved him.

Two guns cracked from behind him, and lying on his face, he saw the heavy-set man go down. Emmett Fair raced past him. A man was yelling:

"That's all—that's all!"

Fair came back in a few moments and bent down beside Cole.

"Kramer get it?" Cole asked him.

"He's dead," the commissary said. "Three bullets in him. One of them must have been yours."

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Another figure came out of the darkness, and Cole Barrett heard Diana Flynn calling anxiously: "Mr. Barrett—!"

Cole sat up, grinning a little.

"She sounds worried," Emmett Fair chuckled. "You're the lucky one, Barrett."

"Hell," Cole said softly, "she's a wild woman, Fair."

"Now," the commissary man observed, "you're pretty tough yourself, friend. You

wouldn't want a town girl."

"No," Cole said thoughtfully. "I missed one like that."

"This one," Emmett Fair said, grinning, "you won't miss."

When Diana Flynn dropped down on her knees before Cole Barrett, Fair said softly:

"I'm telling you, Barrett."

Cole Barrett had an idea Fair knew!

CURTAIN CALL FOR A HAS-BEEN

(Continued from page 49)

his hold-up that had given Jack Kearny the chance to kill Easy Ed Walsh. But the stolen money had been returned, and no one spoke out against Andy being freed. Once on the street, John Tremaine said, "Son, get away from this crowd. Go to the hotel and see Jennie."

Andy hurried away, and the crowd swarmed about John Tremaine. Claire Benson was there, proudly smiling. Samuel X. Carter pushed forward.

A miner said, "Friend Tremaine, I have some legal trouble over the ownership of my claim in the hills. I'll sure pay you good to settle it for me."

John Tremaine shook his head, and regretfully said, "Sorry, but I am not a lawyer. Were I, I would be glad to take you as a client."

Samuel X. Carter said, "Tremaine, my law office is full of law books that need the dust cleaned off them. A couple years of study will make you the best lawyer in Nevada. As I said, you are a better lawyer than actor. Friend, I am offering you a partnership in my law firm."

It was now John Tremaine's turn to be surprised and unbelieving. He was forty-two years old, and he knew that it was difficult to teach an old dog new tricks. But he saw Clair Benson gazing at him with hope in her eyes. He answered her hope with an unspoken promise. Then he turned back to Samuel X. Carter and said, "My friend, I shall spend the rest of the day dusting off your law books."

And he was a little more surprised when the listening crowd cheered.

THE FATHER BEAR'S CUB

(Continued from page 39)

Charles' riders played three-handed stud poker over a bottle.

Luther Benedict sat on his porch in the dark smoking his pipe, and Martha and Kyle leaned on a corral fence under the cottonwoods.

"Everything is so peaceful now—everything should seem so right now, Kyle, but it isn't," Martha whispered. "To save Twin Bells Ranch you had to kill a man."

Kyle answered dryly, "Your dad killed a man to save me first."

She was prairie-wise. She would not

brood too long, Kyle guessed, because of the violence which brought death to the renegades who had plotted to murder her father.

"You will go back to Fort Peck now?" she asked softly.

"That had occurred to me. But it's a dull life. Much of my time is spent playing checkers with the Father Bear, who itches in his own idleness. I have played with the idea, in the last few minutes, of sending your dad back in my place to keep Square John company in their old days.

Or I also could stay here and help rebuild Twin Bells."

Martha's voice was profoundly innocent: "After all, Kyle, an unmarried girl couldn't live here like that!"

Kyle grinned in the darkness. "Don't you think Giles Marcus would get married in order to keep his job? I'll speak to him at once."

Martha gasped and swung at him angrily. He ducked her slap and as she whirled and stumbled he caught her in his arms. His laugh roared in the night.

Her spirited sobbing and his laughter died at last into a blissful silence and old Luther, peering from the porch, yelled crustily, "Dang it, where is everybuddy? Most onsociable danged ranch in the valley! I'm gonna write Square John asking an invite to a visit!"

BIG SWIMMING

MANY were the dangers faced by the old-time cowboy in everyday life. Whether alone or in company with his fellows, Death reached constantly to tap him on the shoulder.

A prairie-fire might catch him in the open, without means of setting a back-fire. But he could, and often did, "run for it". A blizzard might strike at a time when he was unprepared for cold or snow. But the cowboy could shiver, and "rough it out", sometimes freezing to death in doing so.

Stampedes were likely to occur at night, when fast riding in rough country was suicidal. Ropes might break, or cinches fail. And man-killing horses, proddy cattle, and prairie-dog holes took their toll of maimed and killed.

But probably the worst of the dangers that faced the cowboys of the Old West, was that of getting a herd of cattle safely across a rampaging river. And in this, as in everything else, they worked out a tech-

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HOW'S YOUR { *husband's* *wife's* } I.Q.?



This little quiz lets you decide if you're doing your part to help Uncle Sam hold prices down. No thinking person wants a price inflation like the cruel one we had during and after the last war. That's why we have rationing, ceiling prices and wage controls this time.

	HE	SHE
Does { <i>he</i> <i>she</i> } buy rationed goods without points?	Never ☐	☐
	Occasionally ☐	☐
	Often ☐	☐
Does { <i>he</i> <i>she</i> } pay Black Market prices, forget about ceilings?	Never ☐	☐
	Occasionally ☐	☐
	Often ☐	☐
Does { <i>he</i> <i>she</i> } buy a lot of things you don't really need?	Never ☐	☐
	Occasionally ☐	☐
	Often ☐	☐
Does { <i>he</i> <i>she</i> } want to cash in a War Bond now and then?	Never ☐	☐
	Occasionally ☐	☐
	Often ☐	☐
Does { <i>he</i> <i>she</i> } grab the first things back on the market— <i>when you could do without them a little longer?</i>	Never ☐	☐
	Occasionally ☐	☐
	Often ☐	☐
Does { <i>he</i> <i>she</i> } believe in spending while the money's coming in easy, <i>laugh at you for trying to save up for a rainy day?</i>	Never ☐	☐
	Occasionally ☐	☐
	Often ☐	☐

HOW TO SCORE

Never counts 10, Occasionally 5, Often 0

If your husband's score is:

50 or over—

He's a wonder—
hang on to him!

10-30—

He's pretty good—
steer him a little!

0-10—

Get busy, lady—
take him in hand!

If your wife's score is:

50 or Over—

She's an angel.
KISS her!

10-30—

A word from you
might be in order!

0-10—

Only one thing to
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PRICES DOWN

nique for minimizing its difficulties.

Many of the old-time cowboys could not swim, and occasionally a herd would be held a few days, in hopes that a flooded stream would subside. But it was not the nature of the men of the Old West to wait long. Generally it was decided to cross the herd at any odds. This meant "big swimming", literally—for cattle, men, and horses.

Frequently a herd would be crossed in small bunches. This gave the cowboys a chance to control the cattle in the water. Also to rope and drag out any that bogged in quicksand. It also meant more time in the water, consequently more danger to men and horses.

Many experienced river-crossers undressed before riding their horses into deep water. Boots and spurs, guns, chaps, and outer garments, were removed. This was to keep the waddie from sinking, in case he had to quit his horse in mid-stream.

Not all, however, did this. The story is told of Cimmaron Joe, who took no such precautions. Unhorsed in water over his head, Joe later declared that he had literally "walked on the bottom", into shallower water, held down by the weight of his six-guns and clothing.

Trail-hands of long experience also removed bridles from their mounts. The reason for this is that a swimming horse has a tendency to sink, if its reins are pulled. And reins, if dropped into the water, will entangle the feet of a swimming horse, causing it to pull its head under and drown.

In quitting his horse in mid-stream, the experienced cowboy always leaped as far upstream as he could. For a drowning horse always turns over and over, threshing violently, making the water in his immediate vicinity very dangerous.

Indeed, of all the dangers faced by the old-time cowboy, none were more hazardous—nor taken less as a matter of course—than those encountered in driving a herd of cattle across a stream that was up big swimming.

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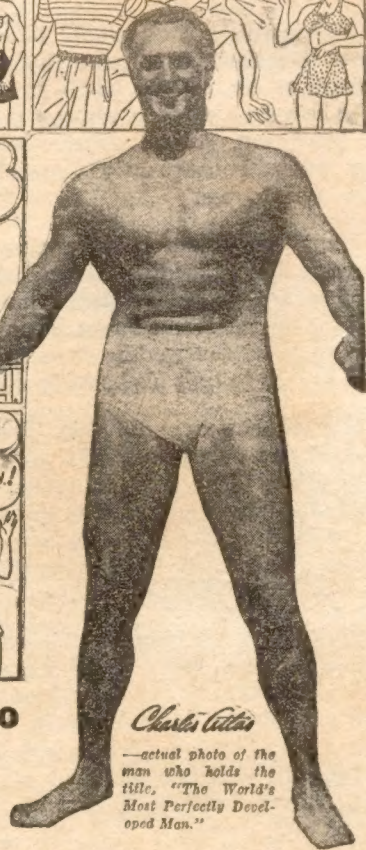
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